

# Heart of Glass

by Cynical-Banshee

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Summary: Shinoa grew up believing family was merely a means to an end. Yuu grew up believing family was synonymous with love. As the war between humans and vampires rages on, Shinoa struggles with the validity of Yuu's beliefs, as well as her feelings for a boy who loves so many others already. Shinoa x Yuu. Set directly after the anime.

## 1. Children

"Not necessity, not desire - no, the love of power is the demon of men. Let them have everything - health, food, a place to live, entertainment - they are and remain unhappy and low spirited; for the demon waits and waits and will be satisfied."

-Friedrich Nietzsche, The Dawn or Daybreak

"Family? To me the word is synonymous with necessityâ€|it is a means to an end. Family is power. Nothing more and nothing less."

-Hiiragi Kureto

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><p>Heart of Glass<p>

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><p>Chapter 1: Children<p>

Shinoa had always understood that cynicism and time went hand in hand.

She was standing on the seventh floor of what had once been a large shopping complex, near a spot in the wall where the concrete had been blown clear through, so that she could see outside and down to the

street far below. It was still early in the morning, and the sun was just barely beginning to paint the sky an innocent shade of blue, like it was afraid to show itself. Shinoa could understand that. Sometimes it was best to stay hidden.

Turning her eyes to the rows of smaller buildings lining out before her, she made sure for the dozenth time that there was no one else in their general vicinity, human or otherwise. It might have been superfluous of her to check after her entire team had already made a sweep of the perimeter, but lately she had fallen into habits that sometimes resembled acute paranoia. If there was even the slightest chance that they were being followed, she needed to be aware of it. Or one of them could die.

Satisfied that they were alone for now, Shinoa turned away from the nonexistent wall and went back to scavenging for supplies.

Though to be honest, she wasn't sure what she had expected to find when she came in here. In the past, the section of the floor she was standing in had been an area for visiting mothers to leave their children while they carried out their errands, and the space was appropriately decorated for that purpose. Colorful plastic chairs were scattered around a wide rubber mat that was laid out on the floor, though most of them were broken, shattered remains of a past that was over and always would be.

There were spelling blocks sitting in the corner too, their letters cracked and chipped by time, though the books lined neatly on low shelves seemed to vary rather widely in difficulty. Some were for toddlers while others were for older children. Privately, she wondered which age groups this area had been meant to accommodate. Surely children's interests and abilities changed as they grew older.

Not that she really knew what a "child" was anymore. That idea had died with the previous world. Back then, Shinoa would not have even been old enough to join the army. Yet today she was responsible for four other lives.

Little bits of rubble crunched beneath Shinoa's shoes as she paced across the room. It was a strange feeling; everything looked gray and broken in the pale half light, but this place retained a certain lightness to it, like the innocence that had once lived here was struggling to keep it home, even as shattered fluorescent lights dangled from the ceiling, even if the walls were scored with claw marks.

Squatting before the lower bookshelf, she slowly scanned the volumes placed therein. Most of them were fairy tales and stories for little children, which she large ignored. However, there was a certain spine whose title briefly caught her lavender gaze.

Reaching forward, she pulled the dust cloaked book out of its shelf, coughing gently as a small plume of debris wafted out to greet her. Waving it away with a hand, she turned the book over in her hand and read the title.

\_Katakana and the Japanese Language: For Beginners\_

She was reminded then that Yuu still couldn't do much more than read

hiragana, an unfortunate side effect of his longtime confinement at the hands of the vampires. It had obviously had a negative effect on his ability to perform at school, not to mention communicate effectively with others, though she refrained from blaming all of Yuu's problems on a language barrier. Being fluent in the language wasn't going to make that boy any less of an idiot, after all.

Still, she shrugged off the backpack she had slung over her shoulders before coming, opening it to slip the instructional book inside. Maybe, when they had some time to kill, she would teach Yuu a thing or two. She couldn't allow him to be nearly illiterate forever.

After putting the book away, she shuffled through the rest of her backpack's contents and found it disappointingly empty. Coming to this particular floor had been a waste of time. She should have listened to her head and chosen somewhere else to search for resources.

"Shinoa?"

Blinking, the sergeant turned to see Yuu standing at the door, leaning against its frame. He was dressed in casual clothing, and even after all these months on the run the sight seemed a little disjointed to her; she had grown used to seeing the boy in his JIDA uniform. His hair had grown even more unruly during that time; he was in need of a haircut.

Her eyes then drifted down to the exposed skin of Yuu's neck, and rested on the almost indiscernible twin pinpricks set into the skin there, virtually unnoticeable if one wasn't looking for it already. It was proof that Mika had fed directly from Yuu recently, despite Shinoa's insistence that the fledgling vampire rely on the blood the entire team provided instead. Not that she really expected the former human to follow her orders.

The sight made her heart hurt for some reason, but she couldn't really explain why. Then it occurred to her that she was staring, and went back to scanning the bookshelves, or at least pretended to.

"Oh, Yuu," she said, not moving her eyes. "Are you done on your end?"

"Yeah." the swordsman left the door frame and walked into the room, stopping when he was a few feet from her. "Found some knives, and other stuff we might be able to use later. Hard to find anything that isn't broken or rusted over by now."

"Mmm," Shinoa agreed, admittedly still lost in her own thoughts. She reached out and traced a finger down the spine of another book. "And the others?"

Yuu gestured vaguely with a hand. "On another floor, looking for food. Though I think Mitsuba went off to do her own thing."

Shinoa snorted softly at that, leaving the books be and standing up. "Why do Yoichi and Kimizuki always have to get the food?"

The boy standing before her grinned wolfishly at that. "Because neither you nor Mitsuba can cook, obviously."

She just glared irritably at him for that, lacking the inspiration to make a snappy comment in response. Slinging her backpack over her shoulder, she walked past him and made for the door.

"So what were you looking for in here, anyway?" Yuu said behind her, hands shoved in his pockets. "Did you find anything useful?"

No, she hadn't. It had been a complete waste of time. But she avoided saying so, partly because she didn't want to admit it to Yuu, and partly because she didn't understand why she had come in here herself. Perhaps part of her had read the words \_Children's Center\_ and gotten curious. Childhood was a privilege that she had been deprived of. Maybe her heart had thought that she would earn back a bit of that privilege by going inside.

Looking back on it now, it had been a silly sentimental decision. That room only had things meant for children. And they were not children.

Masking her emotions with a wide smile, she turned back to Yuu and instead asked teasingly, "And what about you, Yuu? Seeking me out so soonâ€¦|don't tell me you missed me that much?"

Yuu just rolled his eyes and tried to swat her on the head, which the girl easily dodged. "I've been with you every hour of every day for the past five months. It's impossible for me to miss you."

Shinoa just laughed, thankfully not having to fake it this time.

"I concede your point."

Still, she couldn't help looking back at that room one last time before departing.

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><p>According to Yuu, Kimizuki and Yoichi were supposed to be on the ninth floor, so they began climbing the stairs to meet up with them, as the escalators were now long dead.<p>

Well, not that this stopped a certain boy from having his fun.

"I've always wanted to do this," Yuu said excitedly, skipping up several steps at once.

Shinoa just stared at him, standing on the physical staircase that rose up parallel to the nonoperational escalator. "You meanâ€¦|use an escalator?"

Yuu just rolled his eyes again, in that admittedly endearing exasperated manner only he could pull off. "No, of course not. I meant use an escalator in the opposite direction."

The sergeant just continued staring at the boy, watching as he skipped ahead of her. "Uh huh."

A grunt of disapproval was tossed her way. "You just don't get it,

Shinoa. When I was I kid these used to move all the time, and then it was really hard to get all the way to the top without tiring yourself out. Not to mention security always caught me before I could make it."

Despite her intentions, Shinoa found herself smiling bemusedly, shaking her head as she began following Yuu up the steps. "You do realize we're both the same age?"

"Only in age, Shinoa. Not in spirit."

Ah, yes. In that respect I am practically your generational senior, Shinoa thought sarcastically, but did not say it out loud, doubting Yuu would get the joke. Instead she just sighed and said, "You're an idiot, you know that?"

They reached the next floor a moment later, with her male companion leaping the last five steps in a single jump. He dusted his hands off and had an extremely satisfied look on his face, and Shinoa had to suppress the urge to burst out laughing on the spot.

"You guys say that too often," the swordsman quipped, falling into the step beside her, their footsteps echoing off the walls. "If you aren't careful, it just might become true."

"And what makes you think it isn't already?"

Shinoa had never really been the type to frequent places like this during her childhood. Malls were the kind of place you went with friends, of which she had been severely lacking. Besides, the Hiiragi oligarchy never would have approved. Even with the utter lack of regard her relatives had given her, flippant activities like that weren't to be tolerated.

But she had been to a mall before, and knew enough about them to understand that the deafening quietness surrounding them should feel more than a little surreal. Big, wide open spaces, high ceilings, empty chairs, but no people. The entire place felt like a massive chest cavity where someone had plunged their hand in and torn out the heart that lay within, so that it was just an empty husk, an imperfect memory. Still, she could appreciate the weird feeling it gave her, and she might have even considered the atmosphere to be romantic.

That was, until they turned the next corner.

Shinoa was about to retort to another one of Yuu's crude remarks when she saw it. At first it was just a thin shadow at the edge of her vision, like the grasping fingers of sleep as they pull you down into oblivion, until she had rounded the corner entirely. And then there was nothing stopping her from seeing it.

A dead body was hanging from the ceiling not twenty yards ahead of them, suspended in space by a thick rope tied around the corpse's neck.

It was barely a shadow in the meager morning light, but somehow that made it look all the more gruesome. Its arms were hanging limply at its sides, the head drooping down in a similar manner, like its limbs were at the mercy of a bored puppet master who had left his doll to

die. Its clothes were tattered and ripped, and it seemed to hover over them like some dark angel, the vengeful kind, the kind that came from above but belonged below.

Shinoa didn't know why she reacted how she did. Maybe it was because she was in the middle of an entertaining conversation with Yuu, or maybe her thoughts were still wandering from back in the children's room. She didn't really know the reason. But once her brain computed what exactly it was seeing, she gasped audibly and grabbed Yuu by the arm, her fingers sinking almost painfully into his flesh.

She heard Yuu inhale sharply, though his reaction was more muted than Shinoa's. They both came to a stop near the bend of the corner, rooted in place by the shadowy specter suspended above them, as if pinned down by its sightless gaze.

"Is it a human?" she breathed quietly, like she was afraid it could hear her, even though it was obviously dead.

Yuu narrowed his eyes at the corpse, his free hand moving instinctively to grasp the pommel of his sword. "Looks like it. Not that it really matters. Everyone dies the same."

"Very true," Shinoa murmured, oddly unable to look away. The moment of black fear had passed, and now she more fascinated than anything else. She wondered who this person had been, in life, if he had died before or after the virus, who his loved ones were.

Unfortunately, answers to questions like that tended to be lost in death.

Yuu cleared his throat gently, getting her attention. "Shinoa, are you okay?" he asked, flexing his arm to remind her that she was still holding onto it.

"Huh? Oh. Sorry," the sergeant stammered, releasing her friend. She had forgotten that her fingers were still wrapped around the boy's arm. Yuu just smiled reassuringly and walked past her, until he was standing directly beneath the hung man.

"Poor bastard," he murmured, shaking his head slowly. "No one should be made to die like this."

Shinoa walked over and stood next to Yuu, joining him in examining the body. From here she could see the man's contorted face, the jaw loose and hanging from an odd angle from where the rope had choked him, the stained whites of his half closed eyes.

They stood there like that, gazing at the visage of death, not saying a word to each other.

"Come on," Yuu said at last, turning away from the corpse. "The others are waiting for us."

"Right," Shinoa murmured, walking backwards with her eyes on the body. She watched it until they turned around the next corner, and then it was hidden from her sight forever.

This section of the floor opened up into a vast, wide open space, the walls covered from floor to ceiling with various types of foods.

Yoichi and Kimizuki were standing at the far end of the fruit section, enclosed by stands stacked high with old, rotten fruit. Their voices floated in Shinoa's direction as they drew closer.

"So, you figure Shinoa's got a height complex?" Yoichi asked nonchalantly, tossing a can of tuna in Kimizuki's direction.

The taller boy just sighed as he caught it, stuffing the can into his backpack without looking. "Everyone on this squad's got some damn complex. Shinoa's got a height complex, Mitsuba's got a superiority complex, and that vampire's probably downright insane."

"Jeez. Don't be so mean to Mikaela," Yoichi urged him, digging around for more tuna.

"I'm just stating the truth. Have you seen the way he looks at Yuu sometimes? I mean, I know that they're practically brothers and everything, but sometimes he acts obsessive. Not to mention he still insists on feeding directly from Yuu."

"I'm sure he just needs time to adjust."

"It's been five months. I-"

"You what?" Yuu asked icily, cutting both of them off.

The two boys visibly flinched and looked behind them, just in time to see Yuu frowning in their general direction. The swordsman had his arms crossed over his chest, and while he wasn't exactly angry, his displeasure was rather evident.

"O-Oh. Yuu. I didn't hear you coming!" Yoichi said a little too loudly, obviously rattled that they had been listened in on.

Yuu just sighed, letting his hands fall back to his sides. "You guys don't have to talk behind our backs, you know. If you have an issue with one of us you should just say it to our faces."

"I wasn't trying to hide anything," Kimizuki pointed out, holding his hands up in a 'what can you do' manner. "Your vampire friend doesn't pay attention to me no matter what I say."

Unfortunately, Yuu couldn't really argue with that. He had hoped that as they spent more time together, Mika would readjust to living around humans, or at least learn to accept his squamates for who they were. Instead the vampire seemed more inclined to ignore the others completely, only speaking to them when it was completely necessary. The only person he actively conversed with was Yuu, but even that was mostly in private, especially when he needed to feed.

Speaking of which, Yuu hadn't understood why Mika refused to drink the blood the team provided for him. Wasn't all blood the same? But Mika had insisted that blood tasted differently depending on who it came from. Not that Yuu thought that was the real problem. Mika would probably avoid accepting help from other humans until it killed him.

"I believe you," Yuu said at last. "Just lay off him for a bit, okay? He's been through as much as we have. Even more, maybe. We might have acted the same in his shoes."

Kimizuki just shrugged, and Yoichi smiled before nodding vigorously. Shinoa found herself feeling rather pleased at the sight. Half of her had expected Yuu to fly off the handle at the idea that someone was speaking ill of his friend, so she was pleasantly surprised that he had handled it so maturely.

\_I guess that means he really does care for Mikaela,\_ she thought, holding her own hands behind her back. She had chosen to trust the vampire with Yuu's safety in the past, though that had mostly been because she had no other choice. Once they were safe from the Demon Army's reach she had begun to doubt somewhat that Mikaela was actually trustworthy, but she felt she could banish the thought now. The blond was definitely someone important to Yuu, and Yuu was someone who looked out for the people he cared about.

It was a good thought, but for some reason it made her stomach twist in little knots, like it was displeased with the conclusion she had reached. But what issue was there in her train of thought? She knew she was right.

Everyone loved someone.

"Did you guys see theâ€|uhâ€|guy hanging back there?" Yuu asked, gesturing behind him.

Kimizuki rolled his eyes. "Oh, yeah. That. Yoichi literally pissed his pants when he saw it."

The archer went beet red almost immediately. "I did not!" Yuu laughed as Yoichi desperately tried to cover his pants with his backpack.

"Where are Mikaela and Mitsuba?" Shinoa asked.

Kimizuki pointed upwards, towards the ceiling. "Roof. Didn't want to scavenge so they went up there to make sure we don't get surrounded without knowing about it. I'm sure they're making avid conversation up there."

The sergeant giggled at that, holding a loose fist against her lips. "I'd bet they're both talking about how much they adore Yuu."

"What the hell are you guys talking about?" Yuu grumbled. "Mitsuba does not \_adore\_ me."

"And vampires don't rule the world, Yuu."

Before he could ask what exactly she meant by that, something in Shinoa's backpack started making noise, making them all go rigid. It sounded like a garbled voice, though it was nearly impossible to discern what the words were.

"â€|\_llo? Shâ€|a? Comâ€|nâ€|" \_

Shinoa unzipped her pack and pulled out small portable walkie talkie, which they had procured some months ago from an abandoned electronics store. Most of the technologies left behind from the old world were useless to them without controlled electricity, but they were able to make use of some of them. These walkie talkies were solar powered, so



she had picked them up just in case.

Holding the button down with a finger, Shinoa spoke into the device.  
"Yes, hello? Mitsuba?"

\_"Shinoa,\_" the blonde's voice crackled through the speaker, slightly warped by the layers of concrete that stood in the way of the transmission. \_"You should probably get up here. There-\_"\_

\_"A small convoy of humans has gathered some blocks away from here."  
\_Mika's voice suddenly cut Mitsuba off, coming in from nowhere.  
\_"They're idle right now, but they might head this way soon. You should probably come take a look."\_

\_"H-Hey! I was talking-"\_

\_"Did you find anything useful?" \_Mika asked, ignoring the blonde entirely.

"Yes. We'll be up there as soon as we can," Shinoa replied, fighting the smirk creeping onto her face. She could hear Mitsuba screaming something abusive in the background, until she turned the device off.

But her expression returned to a more serious one a moment later, as she turned to look at her teammates.

"Humans," Kimizuki said, narrowing his eyes. "It's been a while since we ran into anybody. We haven't had to fight for weeks."

"Let's keep it that way," Shinoa suggested, taking point as she led the rest of them towards the stairs. "Come on. Let's get up there before Mitsuba tries to take on a vampire by herself."

\* \* \*

><p>The elevators were obviously broken, so they were forced to walk the last few flights to the roof, their footsteps echoing emptily off the walls of the stairwell.<p>

"Don't peek," Shinoa snarked over her shoulder, where Yuu was following a few steps behind her.

The swordsman flushed gently and turned his face pointedly away from the hem of the sergeant's skirt. "Wasn't planning to."

A few minutes later they reached the rusted iron door at the top of the staircase, which was already hanging slightly ajar. Kimizuki pushed it open with his boot, admitting the four of them to the open morning air.

Shinoa found herself shivering when she stepped onto the roof; it wasn't going to be fall forever, and soon enough winter would take its turn on nature's throne. The wind felt more chilly every day, and the brooding clouds hanging overhead didn't do much for her mood either.

Mikaela and Mitsuba was standing at the far end of the roof, near the edge so that they could keep tabs on the human colony. They turned when the rest of the squad approached from behind them, seriousness

etched into their expressions.

"Has anything happened since you contacted us?" Shinoa asked, holding her hand out for the binoculars in Mitsuba's hand.

"Nothing worth noting," the blonde reported, handing the binoculars over. "I think they stopped to take a break. The convoy stopped a few blocks from here and hasn't moved since."

Pursing her lips, Shinoa raised the magnified glasses to her eyes and peered across the rooftops. There, situated in a wide intersection some hundreds of yards away, was the human convoy. A single truck, likely filled with supplies, was parked beneath the shadow of a ruined building. The soldiers, of which Shinoa counted about twenty, were sitting in a loose circle around the vehicle, eating quietly amongst themselves.

"Mikaela, you have better eyesight than we do," she said, tossing the binoculars to the blond, who caught them with one hand. "Are any of them armed with Cursed Gear?"

The vampire simply stared at her for a brief second, and for a moment Shinoa thought he was going to ignore her question. But then he brought the binoculars to his face and looked at the convoy, his elongated fangs pressing against his lower lip as he examined them.

"Doesn't look like it," he said at last, handing the binoculars back to her. "I can only make out enchanted weapons on those soldiers. But there could always be a commander sitting out of sight. We can't see everything from this angle."

"Mmm," Shinoa hummed in agreement, turning to squint at the intersection once more. They were just specks from here without magnification. The rest of the team looked at her expectantly, awaiting her orders. It was strange, really. They weren't part of the JIDA anymore. They had seceded months ago, but her friends still stuck to the chain of command when it came to situations like this.

It was probably for the best, but she didn't relish the responsibility it placed upon her.

"Alright, everybody. My intuition tells me we ought to leave while we still can," Shinoa said, clapping her hands together. "We never know when more humans will show up, not to mention that there could still be stray vampires around. We don't know how much the front has moved since we left."

Everyone nodded in agreement, even Mikaela. The boy might be stubborn and antisocial, but he wasn't stupid. He wasn't going to argue against a logical decision. Shinoa made sure to remember this for the future. It was a method to keep the vampire in check.

They retraced their footsteps down the stairwell, not saying much between themselves. It would have been faster to exit onto the ninth floor and go down from there, but Shinoa refrained from doing so. She didn't want to see the man hanging from the ceiling again. Or the children's center, for that matter.

Several floors later, Mikaela started talking with Yuu, and Shinoa gave in and began listening in on their conversation.

"It's been months, now that I think about it. Since we've talked to anyone besides ourselves."

"That is to be expected. We're avoiding them on purpose." Mikaela's response was its usual mix of sarcasm and irrefutable logic, but she noticed his voice lost its hard edge when directed towards Yuu.

"I know. But it feels strange." Yuu's voice was the same no matter who it was for. "Even when we were trapped in Sanguinem, there were other humans. It's weird, being this isolated."

There was the sound of shifting clothing, and Shinoa figured Mikaela must be shrugging. "I don't know. For a long time I was neither human nor vampire. You don't have to be alone to be lonely."

How utterly true that is, Shinoa thought, chewing on the inside of her lip. She had grown up surrounded by the most powerful underground family in Japan, the Hiiragis, and yet the greatest thing she associated with her childhood was solitude. Whenever Yuu expressed his desire to protect what he called his 'family,' sometimes she didn't understand what he really meant.

Family was just an ugly word to her.

They reached the bottom floor soon enough, and wisely chose to leave through the rear entrance of the shopping complex. Once they had emerged onto the back street they began making their way away from the human convoy, making sure to keep their movements as discreet as possible. It was so deafeningly quiet that knocking over a stray soda can could have given away their position. And Shinoa preferred to avoid having to fight against her own kind.

The next several moments passed in silence as the group moved on, trying to take as many alleyways as possible. Once they were far enough away from the convoy they could relax a little. But deep down, Shinoa knew that as time went on it was going to become increasingly difficult to avoid confrontations with anyone, human or vampire irregardless. The closer they got to Sanguinem, the more populated their surroundings would be.

Soon the human convoy was nearly a thousand yards away, and Shinoa felt her shoulders unwinding just a little bit. She could see the relief sweeping through the rest of her squad as well; none of them wanted to cross swords with another human. Maybe it was because they had been brought up to believe that it was them against the vampires, though this was largely still true. They didn't have time for infighting when outside forces were trying to exterminate them. To Shinoa's understanding, before the end of the world humans had exercised dominion over the planet, and at the time homicide had been a common phenomenon. She couldn't imagine the logistics behind that.

It seemed that when humans had no worthy opponents to destroy, they resorted to killing each other.

"How close would you say we are to Sanguinem?" Yuu asked softly, coming up behind her.

Shinoa blinked in surprise, having not noticed his approach. "Let's seeâ€¦not too long now, I'd say," she replied, counting on her fingers. "Another week or two at most. We're going in a straight line this time, after all."

Yuu hummed in agreement. They had taken a winding, erratic path across Japan after their escape from the JIDA, trying desperately to lose the literal armies that had been sent after them. For a while Shinoa had been afraid that they would be forced to dive into the sea and swim for their lives, but eventually their pursuers had given up on them, especially after the successful assault on Sanguinem. It appeared that General Kureto had higher priorities.

"A week or two, huh?" Yuu breathed, slipping his hands into his pockets. "It's been so long. Soon I'll be able to see Guren again. I wonder if he's alrightâ€¦"

Shinoa bit her lip at the lieutenant's mention. During these past five months, Yuu had never once given up on the idea that they were going to save Guren. It was the entire reason they were even heading back to Sanguinem, as opposed to putting as much distance between them and the JIDA as physically possible.

But to be truthful, Shinoa didn't know how realistic that goal was. She had seen Guren's eyes that one day at the airport, when the Seraph had descended upon them all like hellfire. The telltale blood red eyes that betrayed possession. Guren had insisted that he had his demon under control, but it seemed that Shinoa was right not to believe him. She had seen those eyes elsewhere before.

The last time they had been in her late beloved sister, Mahiru Hiiragi. The demon who resided in Guren's sword.

The demon who now had a firm grip on the man's mind.

Ignorance was indeed bliss. Yuu didn't know anything about Mahiru or her history, except for the fact that she had once existed. He didn't know about everything her sister had gone through to create the Cursed Gear, or her relationship with Guren, or how Shinoa herself felt about her. It seemed that everything always led back to Mahiru, in the end. The girl who had helped bring about the coming of the apocalypse, as well as made the weapons necessary to survive it.

If anything, as a Hiiragi, Shinoa felt a certain measure of responsibility. Yuu had a right to know. He had a right to know that Guren was probably never coming back. She had never heard of someone fighting off a demon once it had possession of the mind and body, especially someone like a Guren, who had walked the line between control and chaos for so long.

"Yuu," she began, clenching her fingers together, "I need-"

She never got to finish her sentence, because a second later everything descended into chaos.

She felt the footsteps before she saw what they belonged to. Fast, heavy rumbles, like the earth itself was experiencing palpitations of the heart. She felt her own heart clench immediately as well. She knew that sound, knew it all too well. Her instincts began screaming

at her to run, but her mind knew it was too late. The thing was already upon them. They would be forced to fight.

Well, so much for subtlety.

Turning on her heel, she grabbed Yuu and threw them both to the ground a millisecond before the Horseman crashed out onto the open street.

She felt something large and heavy blast past her ear, as she and Yuu both went crashing to the unforgiving concrete. The panicked shouts of her friends seized her ears a moment later, and then the sounds of blades being drawn, arrows being primed. A low, drawn out snarl reverberated through the air behind her, but she didn't have to look. She knew what it was.

"Horseman!" Kimizuki bellowed, raising his blades before him.

"Shit," Yuu growled, reaching for his sword. Shinoa rolled off of him and fished her scythe out of her pocket, giving it a twirl, until a fully sized weapon was resting in her palm.

Good thing she did, too, because immediately afterwards the Horseman tried to take her head off.

A heavy claw smashed into the concrete two feet to her right, sending a spray of debris flying into her eyes. Raising one arm to cover her face, she swung blindly with her scythe, and felt it catch on something thick and fleshy. A spray of hot, thick blood stained her arm, accompanied by an outraged screech, and she knew she had hit something important.

Then firm hands were grabbing her beneath the arms, and Yuu was dragging her to her feet, away from the monster's proximity. She peeked past her arm to see the ferocity of his expression, and a shallow cut above his eye where a piece of rubble had struck him.

"Come on, Shinoa," he said urgently. "You can't die here."

Meanwhile the Horseman had staggered back several feet, its severed arm laying dead on the asphalt between them. Shinoa managed to find her footing again and backed up to where the rest of her friends were, their weapons at the ready.

Of all the strange creatures and beings Shinoa had seen in her lifetime, the Horsemen of John would always be the most hideous. The long, warped limbs, the scaly wings, the gruesome mouth that was placed disturbingly where the abdomen should have been; everything about its appearance felt wrong. This particular specimen was larger than most, and it towered over them on the asphalt, one of its legs crushing a car beneath its sheer weight. It seemed to be getting ready to charge them again.

"We need to kill it before the convoy notices us!" Shinoa barked, switching her grip on her scythe. All this commotion was bound to be heard, not matter how many blocks away they were from the humans.

"Too late," Kimizuki said lowly, turning to look behind them.

Shinoa followed suit and was dismayed to find that the convoy had definitely noticed them already. More than a dozen men were sprinting in their direction from the far end of the street, swords already out of their scabbards. It was either they killed the Horseman or they faced the convoy.

To be honest, she would rather have the former.

"Go for its legs!" she commanded, then they all charged forward. Mitsuba sent out a wave of energy from her axe, catching the monster square in the middle and causing it to stagger back a step.

Sensing the opportunity, both Shinoa and Yuu slipped beneath the Horseman and hacked at its legs, making sure to cut the limbs at the joints. They swept through the creature's belly and emerged on the other side, trying to dodge out of reach.

But the monster reacted more quickly than them. It turned around its own axis and swung at them with its remaining arm, coming terrifyingly close to beheading Yuu on the spot. It only missed because of the loss of its legs, which sent it crashing to the ground not a moment too soon.

Before the Horseman could lash out at them again, a single green arrow buried itself into the monster's head and exploded, engulfing the upper torso in flames.

"Hurry up and kill it!" Yoichi yelled at them, unusually urgent. He was already nocking another arrow into his bow, preparing to fire again if necessary.

Shinoa put a hand to the ground, trying to get up in order to do just that, but before she could something swept in from the right, its blade plowing straight through the Horseman's body.

When she looked up, she saw Mikaela landing on the far side of the street, his blade dripping red. The Horseman now had a gaping wide hole in the center of its body, and she could see through it to the wave of humans still running towards them, blades at the ready. Then it disintegrated, turning into ash before being carried off by the wind.

Yuu helped her to her feet, and Shinoa smirked as she looked over at Mikaela, who was sheathing his sword. "I guess Horsemen are nothing to a true vampire like you, huh?"

The blond only sighed as he put away his weapon, the tentacles retracting from his arm. "No. Humans are just weak, is all. Besides, Yuu was in danger. I had no choice."

Yes, anything for Yuu, right? Shinoa sighed inwardly, but she knew better than to say so out loud. She didn't any more friction with Mikaela than there was already.

A moment later Kimizuki joined them with Yoichi close behind, flicking the blood off his blades. "Looks like we won't have to worry about the convoy after all," he said.

Shinoa just frowned, looking down the street. "What are you-"

Her words died off a second time, as she realized what the boy had meant.

A second Horseman had emerged to ambush the convoy on the street, and the humans who had been pursuing them were now more than occupied with trying not to be killed themselves. It was strange to see so many humans struggling against a single Horseman, but she had to remember that the monsters grew stronger the further they got from the walls. As she watched, one of the men was crushed beneath the creature's claw, his body splaying out into a patch of red on the concrete.

She watched the scene grimly, gripping the shaft of her staff. As much as she hated to admit it, this could be a blessing in disguise. They could escape unhindered now.

"Let's go, everyone," she urged, returning her scythe to its normal form. "While they're distracted."

The rest of the team nodded and prepared to leave, running back to grab their bags where they had been dropped. Well, all but one.

And of course that one had to be Yuu.

"Wait, we can't just leave them there!" the swordsman said, his sword still drawn. "They're going to die if we don't do something!"

"Yuu, please understand," Shinoa said, feeling a little exasperated. "I don't want to leave them either, but we have to get away before the situation gets worse."

"She's right, Yuu," Mikaela said, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "It's the price we have to pay. They won't feel any gratitude if you save them, anyways. Just-"

"I don't care!" Yuu snapped. He slapped Mikaela's hand off his shoulder, and then he was running at full speed towards the convoy, his sword at his side.

"Oh, that \_utter\_ fool," Mitsuba grumbled, summoning her axe again.

\_Tell me about it,\_ Shinoa thought darkly, before they all chased after him.

The Horseman was facing away from Shinoa's squad, as it was busy decimating the convoy. Taking advantage of its distraction, Yuu leapt through the air and stabbed his sword through the monster's back, burying the blade up to the hilt. It screeched in pain and began thrashing around violently, forcing Yuu to hold onto the handle of his sword for dear life.

The rest of the squad reached him a moment later, and a quick succession of blades tore through the Horseman's body. It fell to the ground slowly, allowing Yuu to wrench his sword free and leap to the ground, before crashing against the side of a building and disintegrating.

But Shinoa didn't have any time to celebrate the victory, because a moment later someone attacked her from behind.

A pair of burly hands grabbed her neck and drove her to the ground, so hard that it knocked the air out of her lungs. As she gasped for breath, the face of the convoy's captain came into view, his eyes twisted with hatred.

"We finally found all you damn traitors," he hissed. Off to the side, Shinoa could hear the sound of clashing blades and knew the rest of the convoy had begun attacking her friends. "General Kureto's got a fine bounty on your heads."

"Let her go!" Yuu shouted, from where he was pinned down by three separate swordsmen.

The captain ignored him and instead raised his own weapon, pointing it straight at the spot between Shinoa's eyes, which went wide at the movement. Her heart began pounding in her chest, and she started to squirm, desperately trying to break free, but she was too effectively pinned.

"I guess not every Hiiragi is worthy," he murmured, before bringing his blade down.

Several things happened at once in that moment. First, Shinoa closed her eyes. She didn't want to look death in the face. She lacked the bravery to do so. Second, she heard several shouts behind her as Yuu broke free from his opponents, and then he was running towards her, screaming her name. But she knew it was too late. The blade was already too close to her throat. Yuu would never be able to see her unless he-

A dark green blade entered the captain's body through the ribcage, and then it sprouted out from the other side, as Yuu stabbed him clean through the chest.

The force of the blow sent the blade veering off to the side, and it struck the concrete by Shinoa's ear, a mere inch from injuring her flesh. Then the captain coughed a spit of blood all over her front, as Yuu twisted his sword inside the man's body.

"I'm sorry," the boy whispered, before pulling his blade free.

The captain's dead body slumped to the ground face first, motionless. Yuu's hands were shaking, and then he actually dropped his sword, something Shinoa had never seen him do no matter how many times he went into combat. But he had never gone into combat against humans before, and he had never once taken the life of another. Not until today.

"Yuu..." Shinoa murmured, shocked into stillness, even as the battle raged around them, even as Kimizuki bellowed that they needed to go now, before reinforcements arrived. She hadn't seen that look of desolation on the boy's face since the day he had first turned into a Seraph. It was an expression she absolutely hated.

"Shinoa!" Kimizuki yelled, kicking a soldier square in the chest. "We need to get out of here now!"



That was enough to snap the sergeant back into reality, and she grabbed Yuu's hand.

"Come on, Yuu. We have to go," she urged, reaching down to pick up the boy's sword. She slipped it into its scabbard before dragging him along behind her, towards the far end of the street. "We have to go now. Please, Yuu."

But the swordsman was listless, in a world off on his own. The rest of Shinoa's squad kicked their assaulters away from them, and then they were running away from the convoy, away from the guilt, and away from the weight of life Yuu had taken with his own blade.

\* \* \*

><p>AN

Hey guys, Banshee here. I've never written for Owari before, so this is new for me. I'm still trying to figure out how I want to write all the characters, but I think I'll get it down soon enough.

I decided to write this fic for a number of reasons, the biggest one being that I ship Yuu and Shinoa to death (not that there's anything wrong with Mika, it's just my preference). Secondly, there don't seem to be many complete fics that flesh out everything that could have happened after the anime, as well as what would happen to Guren, Krul, or how Lest Karr would institute his rule over Japan. This story will seek to cover all those topics, as well as put Yuu and Shinoa together.

As for those wondering where Makoto is, I'll explain that in the next chapter.

Whether I'll be able to do all those things well remains to be seen.

Right now the story's scope feels rather large, and I can already tell it's going to be a long one if I do decide to go through with it, which depends on how interested other people are in this story. I will write the first few chapters regardless.

Thanks for reading!

~Banshee

## 2. Bloodlust

### Chapter 2: Bloodlust

It was important to remember that every puppet had strings, whether they were visible or not.

Ferid Bathory was standing near the edge of a stone balcony, both hands folded behind his back. The sky above had a ceiling, by which he meant that the surface of the world formed the roof of the city in which they resided. He was currently located within the vampiric city of Tenebris-Lux, a relatively isolated establishment far from the war front, which was rapidly deteriorating beneath the continued onslaught of the Imperial Demon Army.

Indeed, though Ferid himself had been the one to supply enough information to the humans for them to complete the Seraph of the End, he found it amusing just how much raw power the livestock had acquired in such a small amount of time. He might have even miscalculated the effect the Seraph would have on the tempo of the war; it was entirely possible that the humans would eradicate every vampire from Japan before he was ready.

Well, that would only serve to make things all the more interesting.

Something flickered at the edge of his vision, and he turned to see that the King of Japan was taking another sip from his glass of blood, stirring it absentmindedly in one hand while his eyes saw off into the far distant future. He was sitting at a small table against the edge of the balcony, one leg crossed over the other, as he quietly contemplated the state of his reign.

"Tell me, Ferid," he said in his deceptively childlike voice, "Why is it that the same blood tastes different depending on the drinker?"

The seventh progenitor smiled slightly, a single fang poking through his upper lip. "I couldn't say, my king. I would assume there is some psychological explanation to it."

"Mph. Psychology. Damn humans and their science," the king muttered, taking another sip of the blood.

"Well, they are currently winning the war," Ferid pointed out airily, punctuating it with an exaggerated sigh.

"Mmm." Third progenitor Lest Karr set his glass down and peeked over the edge of the balcony instead, taking in the sight offered by the terrifying drop below.

There, literal miles below them, a river of molten lava carved its way through the underbelly of Tenebris-Lux. Its harsh orange glow radiated all the way up to where Lest was sitting, and he could feel the heat on his face even at this great distance. He supposed he shouldn't be particularly impressed. It was the meaning behind this city's namesake, after all. Tenebris-Lux translated loosely to 'darkness with light.'

It was supposed to be one of the Japanese vampires' safest havens, buried so far beneath the bedrock that the original builders had accidentally burrowed beneath the vein of a dormant volcano, and were forced to stop. Tenebris-Lux was situated about as far south as one could get without actually leaving the mainland, and Lest had been brought here upon Ferid's insistence that he be kept safe, which the king had thought was simply laughable. Distance meant nothing in the face of something like the Seraph. It was only a matter of time.

Thinking about the angelic being brought another frown to his young face, and he traced a finger around the edge of his glass. He had never thought that Krul Tepes's treason went back so far that it preceded the very war they were currently embroiled in. To think that the former queen had struck a deal with humans, allowing them to

gain access to the Seraph of the End, and now Lest found himself joining a ship that had already begun to sink. Though he still believed that he would have done a much better job of governing Japan, he did not yet know if he was capable of cleaning of Krul's mess first.

"Oh, yes. That reminds me," Lest said, drawing Ferid's attention once more. "How is our dear captive traitor doing?"

The seventh progenitor's smile deepened, and Lest smirked bemusedly when he saw a look of sadism pass the lesser vampire's face. "She's doing wonderfully, my king. She hardly acts out in her cell anymore. I imagine it is only a matter of time before she breaks."

Lest hummed in acknowledgement, holding his glass of blood to his equally red eyes and staring into it. "Have you been abiding by the diet I assigned to you?"

"Of course. One cup every one hundred hours. You should see how she reacts when we come in to feed her, my king. At first she refused to touch anything we offered her, but eventually she gave in and started to feed. It appears even third progenitors cannot hold out forever."

"Good. Continue starving her," Lest instructed, picking up his cane from a nearby chair and turning it over in his hands. He was slightly bothered by his subordinate's comment, seeing as he was also a third progenitor, but he was quick to remind himself that he and Krul were not the same. He was younger, for one, and decidedly more powerful. Not to mention that he did not give into petty fear and strike contracts with humans.

"If anything, she could serve as a useful asset in the future," Lest continued, finishing the last of his blood. It slid down his throat, thick and warm, and set his nerves sparking, though he did not let it show on his face. "It would be unwise for us to terminate our few connections to the humans."

He heard Ferid exhale rather loudly behind him, and he turned to give his subordinate a questioning look.

"Well, if I may, my liege," Ferid said gracefully, "Just how do you plan to turn the tide in this war?"

Lest just smiled knowingly, and turned away from him. He had taken off his top hat so that he could enjoy his drink in comfort, but now he picked up and put it back on his head, leaving his seat and leaning against the balcony railing.

Instead of answering the question, he tapped his cane on the stone floor and asked, "Do you not feel that it is surreal that we are even losing in the first place, Ferid?"

The lesser vampire blinked at the inquiry, but the unreadable smile returned to his face a moment later. "I suppose it is, my king. Why do you ask?"

Lest merely shrugged, and Ferid noticed that the look of self assurance never left the higher vampire's face. This would be a

difficult puppet to control. "When I was still in Germany, my grip over the greater European territory was solid. Even there I heard of how dangerous humans could be, of course, but I never truly believed it. Not until I came here."

They fell into silence, until Lest chose to continue the conversation.

"As for your question, Ferid, I cannot yet give you any specifics. I have a plan of sorts, but I would prefer not to voice it until I am ready. I'm sure you understand."

Lest turned his blood red eyes on his subordinate, his gaze unwavering, and Ferid found himself having to lower his head in submission. "Of course, my liege."

The king smile satisfactorily, then went back to gazing out past the balcony. "It is truly, ironic, Ferid. A thousand generations and we have still lost the arms race. We acquired immortality, shed our emotional shackles, multiplied our strength a hundred fold, and abandoned the concept of love, yet we still find ourselves at the mercy of the humans."

Ferid leaned against a support column, crossing his arms. "Not for much longer, I pray."

"Mmm. Which reminds me; have you been keeping tabs on that one rogue squad you told me about?"

"I have indeed. My subordinates are tracking them as we speak."

"Good. They have a part to play in this game as well. For now, we will continue to hold the humans at Sanguinem."

With that said, the third progenitor turned away from the magma river and returned to the greater palace behind them, his cane tapping rhythmically upon the stone work.

\* \* \*

><p>They ran until they couldn't run anymore, weaving their way through the ruins of a city that had once stood proud. For a good while the human convoy was at their heels no matter what they did, but given more time Shinoa managed to shake them off, until finally they had put considerable distance between them and their pursuers.<p>

It had been early morning when they left the shopping complex, but it was sunset when Shinoa's squad finally fell into an abandoned hotel building, miles away from where they had started running. They all filed up the stairs immediately, not taking any chances, climbing upwards until they had passed the tenth floor of the building and found a room that wasn't too trashed.

Yoichi murmured something about finding a key, but Kimizuki ignored him and kicked the door in instead, allowing them to drag themselves inside.

It was small and cramped in the room, but they could hardly care

less. Two twin beds were set side by side against the wall, their covers and mattresses ripped to shreds, and the mirror hung on the opposite side of the wall was marred by a large crack in its center. They all started falling onto the ruined beds or finding empty chairs to sit on, needing to catch a breather after all the running they had just done.

All but Mitsuba, who instead stalked across the room and struck Yuu across the face.

"You hopeless idiot," the blonde snarled, getting up in the boy's face, who seemed unable to meet her eyes. "You almost got us all killed back there!"

"Mitsuba!" Shinoa sighed, putting a hand to her forehead and reaching out to the girl with her other.

But the blonde just shot her a withering glare, and Shinoa's hand retracted. "I can't believe you did that. I thought you knew better!" she seethed, seizing Yuu by the collar and shaking him like a rag doll. "Those guys even tried to kill us after we saved them!"

"Back off, Mitsuba," Mikaela growled, coming in between the two of them out of nowhere. The shorter girl was knocked back a few steps, caught off guard. "Don't talk to Yuu like that."

Mitsuba just sneered, and it was then that Shinoa remembered the blonde was particularly sensitive to losing teammates to dumb decisions. "Like I care what you think, \_vampire.\_ You guys might not have discipline, but us humans do! Yuu needs to understand that he made a mistake-

"Do you think he doesn't know?" Mikaela snarled, throwing a hand behind him towards his adoptive brother. "Look at his face!"

Yuu was staring forlornly at the ripped up carpet, his lips pursed hard together, brow furrowed so deeply that he looked angry. He wasn't saying anything, but his hands were balled into fists and his arms were shaking, like he was barely holding himself back from smashing something.

Mitsuba saw this and felt her gaze soften a little, but her anger still remained. "Alright, fine. Whatever," she muttered, turning away and storming out of the room. "As long as he doesn't do it again."

"Ah! wait, Mitsuba!" Yoichi chased after the blonde when she stalked her way down the hall, slipping through the kicked in door. Kimizuki just sighed before following his friend, footsteps receding until they could be heard no longer.

"Come on, Yuu," Mikaela said softly, leading the swordsman away. "I'll help you treat your wounds."

When Shinoa turned around she realized she was completely alone in the empty hotel room, alone amongst the torn up wallpaper and the sofa stuffing that smelled vaguely of death.

Exhaling slowly, she turned away from the door and approached the wall, pressing her forehead against it. It had been a while since

they had had to run away from their enemies like that, which was to say this wasn't the first time it had happened. But at least they had managed to avoid inflicting any casualties before. This was the first time any of them had been forced to take another human life.

Looking down at her hand, she clenched it into a fist and pressed it to her chest. She had never done that either. Killed another human, that is. She had killed vampires, but to her that felt like something different. Vampires weren't humans. They hardly felt emotion. Even if logic told her it was hypocritical, she didn't consider the life of a vampire to be precious. Not like a human life.

Now that she thought about it, she hardly knew anyone who had been forced to go to the lengths Yuu had today. The closest example she could think of was actually Guren, but he had taken her sister's life after she became a demon, and was thus driven by necessity.

Even if the captain had fully intended to kill her, she wished there was some other way.

She looked down at her shirt, and suddenly realized she was still in the bloodstained clothing from that morning. The bodily fluids had by now dried into a dark red crust, and the shirt felt like a solid piece of cardboard on her body. Holding back the bile that rose in her throat, she pulled the shirt over her head and hunted something clean out of her backpack, shrugging it on without much conviction.

\_I guess not every Hiiragi is worthy.\_

The captain's words, the last ones he would utter before Yuu killed him. Shinoa found herself frowning deeply as she recounted the words. What did she care? She didn't consider herself to be a Hiiragi anymore. It was just another name to her now. Out here, the patriarchy had no influence over her. She was free.

Well, she would like to think so anyway.

Crumpling the bloodstained shirt in her hand, she threw it inside her backpack, not bothering to clean it. She could take care of it later. There were more important things on her mind at the moment.

Just what exactly they were going to do once they reached Sanguinem, for example.

No matter how many times she ran over it in her head, Shinoa had no idea how they were going to pull it off without having someone close to them die. A literal army stood between them and Guren, and it went without saying that Guren probably wasn't sitting around waiting for them to pick him up, either. Convincing him would prove difficult as well.

\_Too many questions.\_ It was times like these that made her wish she wasn't the sergeant in the group. If there were someone older or more experienced with them, would they have taken over control eventually? She thought about Makoto, her senior who wielded the familiar trident. Not that he mattered anymore. Makoto had been gone for a long time by now.

She still couldn't believe that he had actually chosen to leave them

all behind. It had come out of the blue one day, not long after they had barely survived a tangle with a stray group of vampires, and they were just beginning to clean the blood off of their blades.

"I'm sorry, everyone," he'd said softly, before putting his trident away. "I can't do this anymore."

Shinoa had tried to stop him, of course. When they were isolated out here like this, they needed as many allies as they could manage. But Makoto had been unwavering. He had stayed with them for this long, he said, because he felt he owed it to his dead teammates, so that their lives wouldn't go to waste.

"But now that I think about it," the trident wielder had said, "They're dead. They're long gone by now. And they're never coming back. I don't have a family anymore, Shinoa. They've all moved on without me. Without them I've got no reason to kill."

Then he packed up his bags, and was gone the next morning, and Shinoa had been unable to find it within herself to stop him.

She knew what it felt like to think there was no point in protecting someone.

Closing her eyes and shaking her head, she left their things in the room and went off to find Mitsuba.

\* \* \*

><p>Yuu was silent as Mika dressed his wounds, like his mouth was sewn shut by the bandages being wound around his skin.<p>

The blonde vampire bit his lip nervously as he worked, not sure what he should say. Or maybe he shouldn't be trying to say anything at all. Even after everything he had been through, he could still say that he had never killed a human being before. He couldn't help Yuu this time.

So instead he focused on bandaging his friend, dabbing alcohol on the deeper cuts before wrapping them in cloth. He noticed the swordsman clench his arms a few times in pain, but he still said nothing, because his pain was silent, not the kind one could hear with their ears.

Several minutes later Mika was done, and without anything to distract him he simply sat there, on the mattress behind Yuu. They had come to the room across the one they had just left, for no particular reason aside from Mika's desire to get away from the rest of the squad. He still didn't feel entirely comfortable around any of them. He didn't feel like he could trust them. And he was pretty sure the feeling was entirely mutual.

They sat like that for so long Mika thought he might as well just give Yuu his space, but the dark haired boy surprised him by speaking first.

"We're almost there, aren't we?" he said, looking down at the bandages bound around his arms. "We're almost to Sanguinem."

Mika just watched him forlornly from behind. "Yes."

"I can't believe we're going back there, Mika." Yuu clenched a fist near his hip, like he wanted to grasp the hilt of his sword. "After all these years. After I escaped from there. I never thought I'd have to go back."

"We don't have to," Mika pointed out, leaning back on his hands. "We can still turn back. We can still go somewhere else. We don't have to do this."

But Yuu shook his head, much to Mika's exasperation. The swordsman stood up from the bed, still bare chested, as his wounds had extended into his torso. He crossed the room and stared into the cracked mirror. "I can't leave Guren behind. He's family."

Mika showed his teeth, tugging at the collar of his jacket. "You saw what he tried to do to us back at the airport, Yuu. He would have killed us all if he had the chance. If we go back there now I'll bet he'll try again. Is that how family treats each other?"

"But that wasn't him, Mika," Yuu protested, lowering his head, but he didn't turn to face his brother. "He's beenâ€|possessed, or something. I don't know. But that wasn't the real Guren at the airport. The real Guren wouldn't have tried to hurt us if he could help it. That guy practically raised me."

"Only to fulfill his own ends," Mika pointed out, crossing his arms. "Think realistically, Yuu. The only people who aren't trying to use you are me and the rest of your squadâ€|probably."

The dark haired boy snorted towards the mirror. "Then what am I supposed to do, just leave him?"

"I would."

Yuu looked up at the mirror, looked at his brother's reflection in the broken glass, and saw than a jagged crack ran through the vampire's face so that he seemed split between two different extremes. He had to admit to himself that Mika wasn't the same kind hearted boy he used to be back when they were trapped in Sanguinem. He was more hardened now. More ruthless.

"Look, I know vampires slowly lose their capacity for emotion as time goes on," Yuu said, turning to face his brother, "but the Mika I know wouldn't leave Guren behind."

But the blond just shook his head, getting up from the bed as well. "People change, Yuu. Even you will." He crossed over to the door and pulled it open, but paused before leaving. "I'm not saying I don't think family is important anymore. But sometimes you have to pick and choose who you love more. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices."

Then he was gone, letting the door click softly shut behind him.

\* \* \*

><p>Shinoa found Mitsuba on the next floor above, sitting inside a gaping hole that had blown out of the wall.<p>



It was over ten stories to the ground, but the blonde didn't seem to care, dangling her legs over the abyss as she sat on top of the rubble. The hole in the wall stretched from floor to ceiling, and Mitsuba looked like she was staring into the mouth of some great beast, daring it to devour her whole.

Yoichi and Kimizuki were staying inside a room across the hall, sitting at a desk and chatting idly with one another. They seemed to be there just to keep an eye on Mitsuba, if anything else, for which Shinoa was glad. The blonde had the tendency to act without thinking when she was upset, not unlike a certain bombastic swordsman. It was ironic, in its own way.

Shinoa stopped walking in the middle of the hall, behind where Mitsuba was sitting and where the two boys were watching her from the room. She looked at them questioningly, and they just shrugged back, to which she replied with a disapproving frown. Really, boys were so dense. They had no idea how to comfort an agitated maiden.

Not that Mitsuba fit the stereotypical definition of a maiden, but her point stood.

She walked up by the blonde and sat down next her, though she did not dangle her legs over the edge, instead laying them out parallel to the wall. She knew better than to tempt fate.

"Still mad at Yuu?" she asked.

Mitsuba spared her a cursory glance, then went back to looking out at the cityscape. "Of course I am. Freaking idiot almost got us all killed."

Shinoa smiled wryly. "What's new? He's always doing that."

"Yeah, but this time we came way too close. That captain was inches away from taking your head off, and Yuu ended up having to kill him."

The sergeant drew one knee up to her chest, laying an arm across it. "I didn't know you cared about me that much, Mii-chan."

Mitsuba just snorted at the jibe. "Well, I don't hate you or anything. Besides, you know about my past. I can't stand it when people cause others to get hurt for no good reason."

"Yes, but think about how Yuu must feel," Shinoa said, risking a peek down below. It was dizzying. "He's lived his whole life segregating humans and vampires as 'good' and 'bad.' It must have been difficult for him to kill that captain."

But Mitsuba just sighed, leaning against the outer edge of the hole in the wall, picking up a little speck of rubble and flicking it over the abyss.

"I guess you wouldn't understand, Shinoa. You've never lost someone important to you before."

Shinoa pursed her lips over the inaccuracy of that statement, but she said nothing. Now was not the time to argue over who had suffered more.

"I keep thinking the same thing over and over again the closer we get to that vampire city," Mitsuba continued. "We're going to keep running into situations like this. Eventually we're going to stop getting lucky. Eventually one of us is going to die. I don't know if it's worth it."

"Kimizuki and Yuu will go to Sanguinem whether follow them or not," Shinoa pointed out. "We might as well help them."

The blonde just pursed her lips and turned her collar up to the wind. "I know. But I wish there was some way to convince them otherwise. This whole idea feels like a death wish."

It wasn't the fact that Kimizuki could probably hear them talking that bothered her, or the realization that Mitsuba was being unusually negative. No, the bigger problem was with how much the blonde's words resonated within her.

She was bothered by the fact that she agreed with her.

\* \* \*

><p>Mikaela was closing Yuu's door behind him when Shinoa returned to the floor below, a disgruntled look on his face.<p>

"Why don't you go talk to him?" Mitsuba had suggested. "Try to knock some sense into that thick skull of his."

She had figured she might as well.

"Is he doing alright?" the sergeant asked, approaching the fledgling vampire.

Mikaela pushed his hair out of his eyes and looked down at her, and Shinoa was suddenly made acutely aware of just how short she was. The look on his face made it obvious he was in no mood to talk, but in the end he simply answered her question.

"I dressed his wounds. He's definitely upset, though. I couldn't snap him out of it. Just give him some space."

Shinoa watched as he trudged along down the hall, hands shoved into his pockets. She could guess easily enough that he and Yuu had had some sort of argument, but she could only wonder at its cause. There was so much she didn't know about their relationship, even though they were so important to each other.

For a moment she considered following Mikaela's advice and leaving Yuu alone, but she shook her head at the last second. It was her responsibility as the group leader to tend to the well being of her soldiers.

Besidesâ€|she didn't want Yuu to be alone, wallowing in his own guilt, with no one to turn to. She had been there before. It was one of the greater pains she had ever experienced.

Grabbing the doorknob in one hand, she twisted it and let herself into the room.

Yuu was just about to pull a new shirt over his head when she entered, and he turned when he heard the sound of the door opening, the shirt still wrapped around his head.

"Hello? Mika, is that you?" he asked, voice muffled by the fabric.

"Oh, uh, no. Sorry," Shinoa said, averting her gaze. But she caught a grief glimpse of the boy's body despite her best efforts, and she found herself flushing gently as she forced herself to stare a corner.

Yuu finally tugged his shirt back on, reaching up to adjust his hair. "Oh, Shinoa. Hey."

"Hey," she breathed, strangely captivated, then she blinked and did the mental equivalent of shaking her head. What was wrong with her? "I was just wondering if you were okay."

The young swordsman smiled wanly at her, turning away to rearrange his things. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just a little shaken up, I guess."

Shinoa frowned, not convinced. The boy was obviously not okay, since from her experience Yuu almost never admitted that he was 'shaken up.' Her eyes caught the movement of his hand, and saw that there was a gently bleeding cut on the inside of his palm.

"I thought Mikaela dressed your wounds?" she asked, walking over and reaching for the injured hand.

Yuu blinked and held the hand to his chest, bringing it out of her reach. "It's okay. I don't want to bandage my hands anyway. It makes it awkward to hold my sword."

"You're bandaging it anyway," Shinoa said bluntly, walking over and grabbing the necessary items. "It could get infected. Sergeant's orders."

Yuu's eyes bored into her. "And what if we have to fight again?"

"We won't, if it's up to me," Shinoa said simply, holding up the rubbing alcohol for emphasis.

The swordsman met her eyes for a moment, and decided he wasn't going to convince the girl otherwise. "Alright, fine. But not here. I feel suffocated in this room. Let's go somewhere with more space first."

\* \* \*

><p>There was a dining hall on the first floor of the hotel, behind two tall double doors near the front entrance. Shinoa was a little nervous about putting this much distance between them and the rest of the team, but didn't say anything.<p>

The dining hall itself was absolutely extravagant, or it had been at some point in time, when humans were not livestock and the sun did not rise on a broken world. The floor was carpeted in a rich scarlet color, detailed with intricate little vines and baby angels darting

in and out amongst them. Thick satin curtains hung from the shuttered windows, which were made out of stained glass, and the center of the hall was filled with circular tables covered in white cloths, their tops adorned with expensive silverware and crystalline wine glasses.

She could have easily imagined some sort of high class ball taking place here, except now the carpet was worn out and faded. One of the curtains was torn and dangling by a single thread. The silverware have been spared, but they were rusted and the glasses were filled with dust.

It was a broken sort of beauty.

They both sat at table at the center of the hall, and Shinoa giggled when Yuu mockingly pulled out a seat for her. They sat side by side beneath the velvet curtains, facing towards the far end of the room, where an empty stage served as the graveyard for a better time.

Yuu put his hand between them on the table, and Shinoa dutifully began bandaging it, making sure to clean the wound thoroughly first.

"Before you say it, I know it was stupid," he said softly; voices carried well in the emptiness of the hall. "I shouldn't have gone back to help the convoy. In the end you almost got hurt."

Shinoa just exhaled slowly through her nose, dabbing alcohol against the boy's palm. "Protection is in your nature, Yuu. I don't blame you for wanting to help them."

"But you wouldn't have done the same thing."

"No."

"Why not?"

\_Shouldn't it be obvious?\_ she wanted to lament, but didn't say so out loud, knowing better. Yuu was probably the most idealistic person she had ever met. There was no end to the people he wanted to protect.

"If I had to choose between you and the convoy, I would have chosen you," Shinoa explained, winding a bandage around the boy's hand. He winced, but she didn't care. "You're both humans, but I care about you more. Isn't it obvious, Yuu? Sometimes you can't save everyone. Sometimes you have to choose."

"Mika said the same thing," Yuu muttered, picking up a rusted fork and twirling it around in his fingers. "Why do we have to choose? He said we need to decide who we love more in the end, but it's not like I've got some list ordered from top to bottom in my head. Everything's all fuckedâ€¦"

Even if logic trumped his argument, Shinoa knew he was right too, in his own sort of way. Things weren't so simply as vampire or human for them, not anymore. They had been traveling with a noble for the past five months, after all. She never would have guessed she would be doing that before. If anything, they had more humans as enemies than vampires now.

The carefully drawn lines that had held for so long were beginning to deteriorate.

"Mika said that maybe we should give up on Guren, too," Yuu continued, gripping the fork until it bent in his hand. "But I'm not just going to leave him behind. I can't. You're going to help me get him back, aren't you, Shinoa?"

Shinoa finished the last of the bandages at that moment, but she didn't let go of his hand, and Yuu didn't pull away either. They watched each other for a while from opposite sides of the table, a silent battle of wills, one that ended when she sighed softly and cupped Yuu's hand in both of hers.

"I can't promise that we're going to succeed, Yuu. But we're definitely going to try. And that's what really matters, right?"

At last Yuu smiled, and Shinoa felt her heart soften a little. The swordsman squeezed her fingers back, gently and so fleetingly, but for now it was enough.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

\* \* \*

><p>Unbeknownst to them, two pairs of eyes were watching their private moment together, from a rooftop across the street from the hotel building.<p>

"Oh, they're just so cute together, don't you think?" said seventeenth progenitor Chess Belle, peeking through a pair of binoculars at the human couple. "They're holding hands down there!"

Behind her, Horn Skuld was standing on the rooftop as well with her arms crossed, and she sighed at her partner's eccentric behavior. "They're just livestock, Chess. Who cares about their mating habits?"

"Oh, I just wish we knew what they were saying," Chess sighed, adjusting her lenses. "Don't be like that, Horn. Humans are actually pretty interesting once you get to know them a little! I chat up some of the prisoners every now and then, when I'm bored. I mean, I always end up sucking them dry anyway, but I have some fun along the way."

Horn just shrugged to no one in particular, by now used to Chess's strangeness. They had known each other for centuries and she was still on closer to truly understanding the vampire noble. Tucking a strand of golden hair behind her ear, she said, "Do what you like, I suppose. Make sure to send a message to master Crowley about their position."

"I don't see why we can't just engage them right now," Chess pouted, still peeking through her binoculars. "They're just kids! We could probably have them for breakfast, Horn!"

"First of all, it's well past breakfast time," Horn corrected, playing absently with her whip. "Secondly, we have orders from master

Bathory himself to keep these children alive. Besides, we've fought them once before. Half of them are using weapons from the Black Demon series. Without master Crowley we might not make it out in one piece."

"Tch. You're no fun," Chess sighed, before taking out a communication device and typing out a brief update.

While Chess typed, Horn watched the hotel building intently, zeroing in on where Mitsuba was sitting at the edge of the hole in the wall, above the abyss. Instinct told her these children were more dangerous than they appeared. One was from the Hiiragi patriarchy, after all, and another was a traitor of their kind.

And of course, there was the boy carrying the Seraph gene.

One of two people left in the world capable of bringing about the End Times.

\* \* \*

><p>Living for over a thousand years didn't make pain any easier to bear.<p>

Krul sank her teeth into her own tongue as she fought down the urge to scream, clenching her jaw so hard that she actually drew blood, and she began drinking it greedily on the spot, if only for the placebo effect that it granted her. She hadn't had real blood in over three days, and the hunger was beginning to tear into her from the inside, like someone had stuffed a rabid rat down her throat so that it could wreak havoc in her intestines, claws sharp enough to split her belly in two.

She ended up letting out a soft groan anyways, rolling over on the floor of her cell so that she was splayed on her stomach. It was endless torture, the repetition of the cycle that damned Ferid Bathory had placed her under. First they would feed her, then let her starve to the brink of insanity, then feed her again, but never enough to pull her all the way back from that edge, so that she was constantly teetering at the lip of the abyss, only one mental slip up from being devoured by her hunger and turning into a demon.

Lifting her head from the carpet, she blearily took in her surroundings. Her cell actually did not look like much of one; there was a bed, and the floor was soft carpet. But the walls were unadorned, and there wasn't a single drop of blood anywhere in sight. The room might as well have been made out of solid concrete. It would serve her just as well, or as little.

She turned and looked at the far wall, at the pane of bulletproof glass that fenced her off from the rest of the world. Perhaps, when she was at full strength, she would have been able to break through it, but not when she was so weakened. She already knew that the glass was designed to resist the strength of even noble progenitors. Two guards were also stationed outside the glass, facing away from her; if she were to attempt to break out, they would subdue her with ease.

Dragging herself to the bed, she leaned against it with her head thrown back on the mattress, pupils beginning to dilate into large,

dark red pools. She was still in the same noble robes she had been wearing that day at the airport, the day Ferid had turned the tables on her, the day her treason had been exposed and she had been toppled from the throne of Queen. It was plastered to her pale skin from all the nervous sweat.

Thinking about Ferid Bathory sent her blood boiling, but the most she could do to express her anger was take the bedsheets in her teeth and begin tearing at them. She hated Ferid Bathory. She hated him more than the most disgusting human who walked across this cursed earth. If he was ever so unfortunate to allow Krul to escape from here, she would personally take him and tear his body into pieces, limb by limb, until there was only his conniving head left with his neck hanging in one ruined flap of skin, and then she would stick his head on a pike and leave it there for an eternity.

She was starting to see spots. She thought about Mikaela. Was he alright out there? Had he managed to escape? Was he even alive? She shouldn't be worrying about him. She was barely holding onto her own life. They kept the lights burning in through the glass at all hours of the day in here; to humans confinement in total darkness would have been torture, but for vampires it was the opposite. She felt like she could wither beneath the omnipresent light.

Her heart leapt in her chest when she heard the sound of the door opening. Someone had come with blood. She could smell it through its plastic casing already; a common vampire was walking into the cell chamber with a whole cart of them in his hands, before opening a small slot in the glass wall and dropping a single pack inside.

Krul wanted to pounce on it and tear into the package with all the savagery her teeth would allow her, but she restrained herself, knowing that it would make the guards think they had broken her, which they hadn't. Not yet, anyway. She still had her pride. She was a vampire noble. She was a third progenitor. She had her prideâ€¦

Dragging herself to her feet, she walked over to the pack of blood and tore open the top before tilting her head back and drinking.

It was like tasting the ichor of gods. Usually Krul tended to be picky with the kind of blood she drank, but that was back when she was queen, not when she was a prisoner charged with treason. Right now everything tasted like love. She tilted back and drank all the blood in one swig, then stuck her long thin tongue inside the pack and started licking up the little drops stuck to the inside, not wanting to waste a single drop. Soon they would come around to collect the empty packs from her.

And endless cycle. First she would starve, and then they would feed her. It seemed like they waited just over four days before allowing her to drink. Four days. The maximum time a vampire could go without feeding, even the most powerful of them all, even Krul or even Lest \_fucking\_ Karr. He was probably King of Japan by now. Lest was probably the one who had decided to put her on this depraved diet in the first place. She would have his head, too. She would have all their heads.

Everyone who knew Ferid Bathory would regret throwing her into this desolate cell.

Having licked the blood pack clean by now, she tossed it at the wall and crawled toward the bed, satisfied for now. Her body had been conditioned somewhat during these past months; she was learning to function normally on less and less blood. Curling up on the mattress, ignoring the bedsheets she had torn to shreds minutes earlier, she fell asleep dreaming about bloody revenge.

After a few hours, however, her thoughts turned to a certain blond vampire instead.

\_I'm coming, Mika. I promise.\_

\* \* \*

><p>AN

Just for the record, I don't usually update this often (anyone who has been following me for any length of time knows this) but I figured I might as well get the momentum going on this story.

Thanks for the relatively positive reviews on the first chapter! I'll seek to improve my character portrayal as I continue to write this. Tell me what you think.

Thanks for reading!

~Banshee

### 3. Death and Desire

"While Mahiru Hiiragi remains widely famous for her feat of completing the Cursed Gear, the amount of research as well as the circumstances that led to her success remain largely in mystery. Rather, history seems content to remember what she gave to the human race, which was the tools necessary to survive the apocalypse.

Today she is more of a martyr than anything else, a symbol of hope, power, and perhaps even love. She was renowned for her kind and giving nature, in a world run by a patriarchy who placed everything in the meaning of power. Perhaps we should think not about what Mahiru Hiiragi lost the fateful night she lost her life, and instead ponder the people she left behind. Her legacy may live on in those she loved, unbeknownst to us all."

-Karen Ichinose, excerpt from \_A Brief History of the Hiiragi Clan\_

\_"Kureto? Hmmâ€|well, he's very different from Mahiru, that's for sure. They weren't exactly two peas in the same pod growing up. Kureto's moreâ€|pragmatic, I suppose. He might not lead the clan the same way Mahiru would have. But he will lead. Of that I have no doubt."

-Shinya Hiiragi

\* \* \*

><p>Chapter 3: Death and Desire<p>



Shinoa had once been told that life was beautiful because it was transient. So by that logic, dreams must be gorgeous.

But not hers. Her dreams were hideous.

She was standing in the midst of a rooftop garden, like a fantasy within a dream. Flowers grew from the earth, but the roses and tulips sprouting around her were far removed from the ground, stories in the air atop the mansion built to house the Hiiragi family. The sky was a perfect blue; the satin of her dress was kind to her skin. She had dressed extra nice today. It was a special day, after all.

Behind her, Mahiru Hiiragi was sitting at a small table placed at the center of the garden, sipping languidly on a cup of tea. She looked majestic no matter what she was doing, Shinoa's sister; her ashen colored hair, a lighter shade than Shinoa's, framed a gentle and open face. Shinoa found herself watching her sister rather than the flowers, and if she could perhaps she would prefer to wrap Mahiru in a bouquet, in only to preserve her purity forever.

There was a number of attendants standing at the far side of the garden, turned respectfully away from them so that the sisters might have their privacy. They were either from lower ranked branch families or simply hired hands; either way, Shinoa was not very familiar with them. No one, not even the maids in the mansion, tended to pay her much attention. Even they seemed to understand that Shinoa was not meant to be loved.

They were only present because Mahiru was here.

She heard her older sister say something behind her, and turned to return to the table. The heiress held her hand out, and for some reason Shinoa found herself lifting her own as well, and realized she had a rose clutched in her fingers, which she dropped into her sister's waiting grasp.

Mahiru smiled once she had the rose, then said something else, but Shinoa couldn't tell what it was. She could never hear any words, in these kinds of dreams. Almost like moments like this had never really existed. She curled the hems of her dress in both fists, and for a moment the sky grew dimmer.

Mahiru was still talking, moving her lips soundlessly as she lovingly stroked the rose, admiring it in the light. Deep down, Shinoa didn't really understand why her sister was even here. They both knew the patriarchy would not approve of Mahiru associating with an outcast like her, fatherless demon spawn, whose existence bore no benefit to the family.

She was sure it was done out of pity. It was in Mahiru's nature; to love the unloved, to extend the same caring hand to everyone. Mahiru always wanted to love everybody. Most would have smiled at the thought, but to Shinoa it meant that Mahiru's love was meaningless, because it wasn't exclusive to a single person.

Still, she wanted to appreciate this moment. A cool breeze was slipping through the rooftop garden, and though Mahiru's voice was dead in this world, Shinoa could close her eyes and imagine it. Her heart wanted to believe in those soundless words even if her mind did

not.

She wanted to tell her sister she loved her.

Shinoa opened her mouth intending to do just that, only to find that she couldn't. Her jaws snapped back together, so forcefully that it hurt. Putting a hand to her lips, she was horrified to find that she had none. Instead her fingers pressed against, stringy, pliant flesh, like her mouth had been sewn together by the cruel hand of fate.

She looked over at Mahiru in desperation, but her sister had stopped talking as well, her eyes boring into her. As she watched, the heiress's eyes lost their distinctive amber color, deepening until all that was left was a horrible shade of blood red.

The wind picked up, frigid and harsh, and at the far end of the garden the attendants collapsed like wooden dummies.

The sky darkened and turned a warped purple. As Shinoa clawed desperately at her fleshy mouth, almost sobbing by now, Mahiru left her seat and held up the rose between them, which turned black before fading into ashes. The entire rooftop garden began withering around them, then fangs finally appeared where Mahiru's incisors should have been. The vampire-demon turned away from her and began walking back to the building, opening the door and disappearing inside.

\_No.\_ Shinoa fell out of her chair and began running after her sister, struggling to scream past the strings woven into her mouth. The attendants' bodies had disintegrated into bones when she ran past them. Blood was raining from the sky. The garden was now no more.

By the time she reached the building, her shoes were soaked in the blood falling from the sky and her mouth was bleeding from her trying to force it open. Reaching out, she grabbed the door knob and flung it open, hoping to find her sister there, normal and happy.

Instead the dark, burning form of Shikama-Doji confronted her tear stained eyes, and before she could react it leapt forward and consumed her whole.

\_Shinoa!\_

She woke up gasping, body drenched in sweat, breathless and panicking the moment her eyes flew open to be greeted by darkness. Her hands moved without thinking, and before she could stop herself she had grabbed her scythe and activated it, the reaper's blade extending out into the night.

The moment it reached full size, the room was lit by a flash of lightning, and Shinoa realized it was raining.

Her dilated eyes turned towards the window. The rain in this world was not blood, but water. Her heart was thundering in her chest, and it throbbed in her ears louder than the thunder rumbling outside, almost like her body was trying to block out the outside world, in order to keep her locked within her dark fantasies until she succumbed to insanity.

\_Not me. Your heart, Shinoa. Hide not.\_

The words, spoken in the distinctive voice of Shikama Doji, were whispered into the deepest corners of her mind, before the demon's presence disappeared from her consciousness completely.

Shinoa was given on respite, however, before the fading voice was replaced by another, deeper tone.

"Shinoa? Are you okay?"

Yuu was pulling himself groggily out of his own bed, his sword grasped instinctively in one hand. They all slept with their weapons within arm's reach; one could never be too careful, especially in their situation.

The two of them had come back up to the seventh floor after leaving the dining hall, only to find the rest of their teammates sound asleep. They had found an empty room nearby and taken the beds for themselves, not caring that it would mean sharing the same room. They had gotten used to having to do that by now.

The swordsman was watching her curiously, waiting for her to say something, but for a while Shinoa was only aware of the sound of the rain hitting the window, and how it sounded the same as in her dream, whether it was blood or not.

"I'm fine," she muttered at last, pulling the covers over her head. She turned away from Yuu and tried to go back to sleep, stuffing her now minimized scythe under the pillow.

"Are you sure?" Yuu asked, making to leave his bed. "You were thrashing-"

"I said I'm fine!"

The boy stopped where he was, then sighed and turned back to the mattress. "Alright, if you say so," he muttered, before going back to sleep.

But Shinoa could not reclaim sleep so easily, and she stared hard into the darkness for a long time, distracted by the sounds of the storm outside. It was keeping her from being able to sleep.

Eventually Yuu started to snore, and she was able to comfort herself by listening to the steady rise and fall of his breathing, and after a fitful hour she slept dreamlessly.

\* \* \*

><p>When Yuu woke up the next morning, he found Shinoa sitting quietly by the window of their hotel room, staring out with a forlorn expression on her face.<p>

He sat up in bed and watched her, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. It was still very early in the morning, barely past dawn, but it looked like the sergeant had been up for a while already. Then he remembered how much she had been thrashing last night. Maybe Shinoa just didn't like thunder.

She looked so small, sitting there in the little plastic chair with

her knees drawn up to her chest, still in the thin shirt and shorts she usually wore to bed. It must have been frigid by the open window, but she didn't seem to care, or perhaps she was too distracted to notice.

Finally his jaws parted to admit a yawn, and Shinoa's eyes flitted over in his direction.

"Oh, Yuu," she said softly. "You're up."

"Mmm," the swordsman hummed, still too groggy for words. He rubbed at his face before leaning forward on his knees, not really knowing what else to say, especially after what had happened last night.

Finally Shinoa chose to break the silence herself. "I'm sorry I snapped at you last night."

Yuu smiled wanly. "It's okay."

"I was justâ€¦" Shinoa put her bare feet back to the carpet and leaned one elbow on the window sill, looking out with an agitated expression. "I had a bad dream, was all. It won't happen again, I promise."

Yuu had seen that expression on someone else's face before. The look of someone who was lost and had nowhere to go. The last time he had seen it was in the mirror, a shard of glass he had happened to pass not long after escaping Sanguinem for the first time. He had managed to scare himself with his own expression, back then; eyes hollow and deep, worry lines in the forehead and cheeks, lips turned into a permanent frown.

It was the kind of face a person with regrets wore.

"About what?" he asked softly, setting his head on his arms. A gentle breeze swept in through the window; the storm had abated overnight, and now the air smelled like passing rain.

Shinoa just smiled mirthlessly, as the wind pushed her lavender hair away from her face. She reached up to keep it in place, tucking an unruly strand behind her ear. "Does it matter? Dreams are dreams. They all haunt the same."

Yuu blinked once before responding. "Some more than others."

The sergeant looked over at where he was sitting on the bed, then shrugged. "I suppose."

Silence enveloped them, and Yuu observed Shinoa to pass the time. He realized that he had never taken the time to look at the girl, as in really look at her, take in her features and internalize them. Usually when they spoke she wore that sarcastic, haughty expression that seemed permanently engraved onto her face, but now that she was locked in her own thoughts she looked a little different. Calmer. Mature, even. There was a darkness in her eyes that couldn't be taught, and without the usual ribbon her hair was a loose mane around her shoulders, which made her appear older.

She wasâ€¦actually sort of beautiful, he thought, though he obviously did not dare to say this out loud. For a moment it seemed like he was

peeking into the real Shinoa, the girl who hid behind the sarcastic facade, the ambiguous role of 'sergeant.'

It awoke the natural protective instinct within him more acutely than it should have.

"I told you that I had a sister, right?" Shinoa asked suddenly, not looking at him.

Yuu bunched up the sheets in his hands. "You told me she passed away."

"She was in my dream last night," the girl admitted, turning away from the window. Her eyes were dark pools when Yuu looked into them, and he couldn't see to the bottom. "I dreamed that we were spending some time together. She had taken time out of her busy schedule to come see me."

There was a candidness to the sergeant's voice that he wasn't accustomed to. He realized that this was a different version of Shinoa. The girl was choosing to be honest with him.

"That doesn't seem so bad," he pointed out. "Was that your nightmare?"

Shinoa smirked. "I forget you know little about the history of the Hiiragi family. My sister, Mahiru, was in line to succeed my father one day. I, on the other hand, was a mere cast away. Even if we were sisters, it was frowned upon for her to associate with someone of my standing."

"But she came to see you anyway."

"She did," Shinoa admitted, crossing her legs. Yuu's eyes followed the movement for the briefest of moments, and when she noticed she bit her lip self consciously. "But then again, my sister was always a bit of an enigma. She was fair to everyone, and didn't follow the rules set by the family. Her eccentricity was only overlooked because she was a prodigy. But you're right, that wasn't the bad part. That came later."

Yuu narrowed his eyes. "Did she?"

"Well, not the same way as in real life," she specified. "But yes. The world started to collapse, and in the end I lost her. Shi-chan keeps digging up my memories and warping them, even though I asked her not to."

By that she meant Shikama Doji, the demon she was contracted with. Demons tended to have higher intelligence that more powerful they became, and as Shikama was not of the Black Demon series, her intellect was not as strong as, say, Asuramaru's. But they were still able to communicate on a basic level, just barely enough to get the message across.

\_Your heart, Shinoa. Hide not.\_

What was the demon trying to tell her? They had been contracted for years now, so she doubted Shikama was attempting to take over her body again. Even Guren had admitted that Shinoa had an exceptionally

good relationship with her demon. No, those dreams had resurfaced for a reason. Shikama could see something that Shinoa herself could not.

"What was your sister like?" Yuu asked, leaning back against the bedpost.

Shinoa blinked, surprised by the question. "Why do you ask?"

"I just hear about her a lot," Yuu shrugged. "She's famous for completing the Cursed Gear, after all. Plus she's your sister. But you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"No, it's fine," she murmured, thinking about what she should say. "I suppose, at her coreâ€|she was actually a lot like you."

Yuu grinned wolfishly. "Must've been good looking, then."

Shinoa snorted. "Well, she was, but that wasn't what I meant."

"Are you saying I'm not good looking?"

"I didn't say that either," she said vaguely, not really answering the question. "But you were both ambitious. You both wanted a lot out of life. And you both had a lot of people you wanted to protect."

Yuu went still at that last part, and his smile turned more solemn. "You must have been one of those people."

Shinoa shrugged indifferently. "I wouldn't know. We never spoke very much, despite being sisters. She was always off doing something for the clan, or flirting with Guren."

Yuu looked up in surprise. "She knew Guren?"

"They were lovers," Shinoa corrected, then chuckled at the look of shock that crossed the boy's face. "Well, I suppose it isn't that easy to guess. Guren never told you?"

"That bastard never tells me anything," he grumbled, crumpling the bedsheets again. But then he paused as something occurred to him. "But then that means, when Mahiru diedâ€|"

"It was a long time ago," Shinoa said simply. "Butâ€|yes. I wasn't the only one who lost Mahiru. Guren lost her too."

She didn't add that her sister had turned into a demon after completing the Cursed Gear, or that Guren had been the one to kill her. She didn't say that her sister's demon self not resided on the man's sword, or that it was probably her fault that Guren was being possessed. It wouldn't change anything even if she did say something. Yuu would go after him regardless.

"You must miss her," Yuu said, eyeing her carefully.

Shinoa's face was like stone. It gave away nothing. A skill acquired after years of living under a family who cared nothing for her. "She was always good to me. And back then, it was hard for me to find

people like that. So yes. I do miss her."

Yuu looked down at his hands. "I remember when I thought Mika was dead. He was always good to me too. The vampires were alive, but he was gone. It felt unfair. It didn't feel right."

Shinoa smiled slightly. "Good thing he turned out to be alive, then."

"Yeah, but he went and got himself turned into a vampire," Yuu snarked, which made her laugh. She cared for all her teammates, but Yuu was the only one she actually enjoyed talking to. He was different in that way.

Still, that was probably why they both thought so differently. Everyone had lost someone in this war, but Yuu at least hadn't lost the person who had been good to him from the start, Mika. He hadn't lost his Mahiru yet. Shinoa, on the other hand, had lost her Mahiru a long time ago.

Maybe that was why it was so much harder for her to risk everything for a loved one.

"You look tired." Yuu's voice tugged at the corners of her mind and brought her back to reality, in that infectious way only he could pull off. "Why don't you sleep a bit longer?"

Shinoa rubbed her eyes, but shook her head. She hadn't slept well in the storm, but she didn't want to sleep again. Sleep could mean more nightmares. "I'm fine. I'm already up anyways."

"Come on, just for an hour or two," Yuu insisted, slipping out of bed and walking over to her. "We're not heading out until later, anyway. You should get some rest."

The sergeant rolled her eyes at him. "I'm not made out of glass, you know. I said I'm fine."

The swordsman sighed in exasperation at her refusal, then reached down and promptly picked her up in his arms.

"Woah! Hey! What do you think you're doing?" Shinoa shrieked, kicking and flailing in the boy's grasp.

"You made me bandage my hand yesterday. This is payback," he grinned, tightening his grip on the girl when she continued to struggle. Her form was small, and it was easy for him to restrict her movements. Eventually Shinoa gave up on trying to escape, and settled for glowering at him from below.

"You're a bully," she said bluntly, looking away from him. Her cheeks were tinged.

"I'm a bully who cares," Yuu corrected, before setting her down on his bed, grabbing the covers and tossing them over her. "I'll come wake you in an hour or two. We'll leave after that."

Then he was gone, slipping through the door and clicking it gently shut behind him.

Shinoa sighed in defeat, turning over in the bed until she was comfortable. She really did not know how to handle that boy. Usually people were cowed enough by her abrasive personality, but this did not seem to work on the swordsman. Interacting with him was fundamentally different than other people.

She grabbed the pillow and pressed her face into it. It smelled like him. Not a bad scent, but there was definitely something boyish about it. The mattress was still warm from Yuu's body heat, and she pulled the blanket around her petite form, trying to recapture the sleep Shikama had stolen from her.

\* \* \*

><p>Shigure Yukimi was not happy.<p>

The raven haired soldier paced nervously in circles in the room she shared with the other females in her squad, boots tapping loudly against the stone flooring. She was currently within the captured vampire city of Sanguinem, inside the living quarters that had been assigned to the soldiers for the time being. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, the windowsill, everything was made out of stone; Yukimi absolutely hated it. She felt like she was suffocating inside these impenetrable walls, inside her lack of awareness on what was going on with her own squad leader.

"Yukimi, would you please sit down?" Mito Jujo said from her spot on one of the beds, rather irritably. The fiery redheaded woman was laying down with a book in her hands, but she was being constantly distracted by Yukimi's insistent pacing.

"No, I can't \_sit down\_," the assassin said gratingly, crossing her arms. "I can't take this anymore. We need to do something before the situation gets out of hand."

"Shigure, I think you just need to calm down." Sayuri Hanayori was sitting on the bunk bed above Mito, her legs dangling over the edge. The brunette was dressed in casual clothing, as was the redhead below her, but Yukimi was the only one still in her JIDA uniform. "Nothing's going to come out of you pacing around like that."

The raven haired girl made an agitated noise, turning away from her teammates and stalking over to the window. Putting her gloved hands on the stone sill, she looked out over Sanguinem.

The city, named after the Latin word for 'blood', had been appropriately dubbed. She could still remember the bloodbath it had taken to claim this city from the vampires, the third largest in the world, apparently, according to the great library they had raided on one of the lower levels. There had been human casualties as well, of course, but the deaths had been disproportionately on the enemy side. It was all thanks to the overwhelming power of the Seraph of the End, which had proved its worth in being the turning point in the war.

But even if the Seraph was their reason for victory, Yukimi didn't like it. She didn't like it because of what it had done to Guren.

"He hasn't been the same ever since general Kureto first used the



Seraph," she muttered. "We barely get to see him, and when we do he's busy talking to Kureto. He doesn't even come in to check up on us. He's acting strangely, don't you see? Something's wrong with him."

She turned around to face her teammates, but their responses were not forthcoming.

"Guren has his responsibilities," Sayuri said carefully, looking at her knees. "We can't expect him to dote on us now, with the war in full swing."

"But you know that this isn't like him," the assassin stressed, approaching the bunk beds her friends were sitting on. "He tried to kill Hyakuya-san at the airport. He was reckless on the battlefield. The real Guren would never do that. Something is making him act against his will. I believeâ€¦I believe that he may be possessed."

There was a tense silence as her friends turned to stare at her.

"Do you really thinkâ€¦" Mito began, closing her book.

"No," Sayuri cut her off, almost angrily. "Guren is not being possessed by Mahiru. He has her under control. He's had her under control for years. Why would he succumb now?"

"Then how do you explain his behavior?" Yukimi challenged, walking closer to the brunette. "He's obsessed with winning the war now, Sayuri. He's being absorbed by his own power. Those are the classic signs of possession. And you know the nature of Hiiragi Mahiru's demon. About her lust for power."

Sayuri pursed her lips, obviously displeased by the turn this conversation was taking. "Even if what you think is true - which it certainly isn't - what do you suggest we do? We can't separate Mahiru from Guren now. They're even more inseparable than they were back in high school. I know; I was friends with them."

"Are you saying we should just abandon him?" the assassin asked, aghast. "We went up against a thirteenth progenitor by ourselves to save him, and now you just want to-"

"That's not what I'm saying!" Sayuri snapped, in a rare outburst of anger. Yukimi blinked and took a step back.

The brunette saw this and forced herself to take a deep breath, reaching up to pinch her nose. She was the lost person who wanted something bad to happen to Guren. Her heart hurt just to think about it. She loved him, after all. Even if he didn't return her feelings, she would always love him. And she knew Shigure loved him, too. But sometimes love led to irrational decisions.

"Look," she sighed at last. "All I'm saying isâ€¦in Guren's best interest, we should try not to interfere. We swore to be his bodyguards, but this isn't something we can protect him from. This time it's up to him."

"She's right, Yuki," Mito agreed, tossing her book aside and sitting up. "We can't fight something that's inside his mind. Guren's strong."

You know that. He isn't going to lose to Mahiru."

The assassin just sneered, stepping back from her friends.

"You're blind, both of you," she said, turning towards the door. "I'm going to find Guren and ask him myself."

"Yukimi, wait!" Sayuri leapt off the bed, but the raven haired girl was already gone, disappearing down the hall.

"She's usually so much calmer than that," Mito sighed from her bed.

There was a little lamp on the wall of the bed chamber, a single bright flame burning at its center. It served as the only source of illumination, but as Sayuri watched it seemed to waver, dangerous on the verge of going out.

"I know," she murmured, turning away from the door. "But she loves him. And that throws everything else right out the window."

Yukimi swept through the halls of Sanguinem, her cloak fluttering angrily behind her.

\_I'll show them,\_ she thought, as she wound her way through the stone hallways of the palace, hallways she had memorized as soon as possible in order to avoid getting lost. Her friends had to understand that there was a genuine issue with Guren. How else could they begin to act, if they refused to acknowledge the problem in the first place?

A miracle; upon turning the next corner she spotted Guren walking across the open courtyard outside, keeping pace with Hiiragi Kureto.

"Master Guren!" she called out, jogging across the courtyard to catch up to him. The two men stopped and turned towards the source of the voice, and Yukimi's heart leapt at seeing her leader's face for the first time in weeks.

"Who is this, Guren?" Kureto asked bluntly, once Yukimi was within earshot.

"Shigure Yukimi," Guren intoned, his voice emotionless. "My subordinate."

"Hm. I see." the general eyed her for a moment, until the assassin gave him a curt bow. He might be her superior, but that didn't mean she had to like him. "It seems like she had something to tell you, Guren. I'll give you two a moment of privacy."

He turned and melted into the shadows, not so much as acknowledging her presence.

Not that she really cared. She was here for Guren, not him. She looked up at her squad leader to find him staring intently at her.

"Did you have something to tell me?" he asked.

Yukimi bit her lip, not sure how to ask. Even now there was something different about his stature; the way he carried himself, the self assured smile on his face, the cruel look in his eye. His irises did not bear the telltale red of a possession victim, but she knew that was no guarantee of safety.

"Master Guren," she said at last, "I will ask you this bluntly, if you don't mind."

Guren stared at her impassively, one hand on his hip.

Yukimi took a deep breath before asking softly, "Is the one in control right now youâ€|or Hiiragi Mahiru?"

He gazed at her for a long time, so long that she began to fidget beneath his eyes, despite her usual composure.

Finally he smiled, but it looked more like a smirk. "I'm a \_namanari, \_Shigure. You know we always walk the fine line of control. It fluctuates."

"So am I talking to Guren or Mahiru right now?" Yukimi asked, looking up at him.

Guren closed the distance between them, and then they were barely five inches apart, making her heart rate increase at their proximity.

"Does it matter?" he asked, voice going velvety smooth. "He and I are one and the same, after all. My desires are his. And his desiresâ€|are mine."

His voice dropped an octave lower at the end, and Yukimi felt her cheeks flare up at the realization. Even if this was Mahiru talking, it still looked like Guren, and sounded like Guren, and \_felt\_ like Guren, the man she had secretly adored for so long from the shadowsâ€|

"But why?" she whispered, her voice coming out more hushed than she intended. "Why must you walk that line? Why can't Guren be in control?"

A gloved hand descended slowly towards her face, and then Guren was holding her chin and tilting her head back, making the woman's breath catch painfully in her throat.

"Because," he murmured, "To protect the people he loves, he requires power. That is something he and I both understand. Power is a means to any end. Whether it be revengeâ€|or conquest."

Close. \_He was too close\_. Through the panicked veil of her blushing face, for a split second in time, she thought she saw Guren's irises burning a deep, dark red, so deep and red and it looked like his heart was pouring out of his eyes.

He leaned forward, the space between them growing incrementally smaller.

Yukimi shut her eyes and braced herself.

"Guren!"

Mito was standing at the entrance to the courtyard, breathing hard like she had run to catch up to them. Guren looked away from Yukimi to regard the redhead instead, a languid smile on his face.

The two soldiers locked gazes for a tense, drawn out moment, which ended when Guren turned and melted into the shadows, much like Kureto had.

Yukimi fell to her knees on the hard cobblestone courtyard, arms reaching up to hug herself. As Mito ran over to help her up, she felt at the probing hurt in her chest, and she didn't think it was just from being in close proximity with Guren.

It was the pain of being right.

\_That wasn't Guren.\_

\* \* \*

><p>[<em>I trust that you are developing a plan to counter the Imperial Demon Army,<em>] said second progenitor Urd Geales, his deep voice resonating over the video feed.

Of all the vampires Lest had ever met in his many centuries of life, Urd was one of the few he actually respected. Though the two of them were both well known for ruling over their respective territories with an iron grip, Lest would be forced to admit that he ruled through fear and outmaneuvering more than Urd did. He had been to the vampire's territory in Russia in the past, and had been surprised to find that the humans there seemed content with their status as livestock.

It was difficult to break the will of a people, but it was even more difficult to have them be accepting of it.

Lest just smiled amiably, hiding his thoughts behind a toothy grin. "Of course I am, Urd. You put too little faith in me. Was it not the council's idea to send me to Japan?"

He was sitting in a dark, unlit room, the main council communication chamber that was meant to be used by those nobles who qualified to be present. Anyone else was traditionally forbidden from attending such meetings.

Well, not that Lest had ever cared too much for tradition. Ferid was a mere seventh progenitor, but he was currently standing behind Lest's chair, though he kept his head lowered and said nothing. Which was probably for the best.

[\_I don't doubt your ability to govern, Lest,\_] Urd said, his eyes boring through the video feed. Even when he was giving compliments the noble was intimidating, even to Lest. [\_But neither do I doubt the threat that the Demon Army poses. Their success with the Seraph of the End will encourage other cults throughout the world to double their research.\_]

"I am quite aware," Lest assured, sitting in the center of the ring of video screens. There weren't many nobles present this time; this

was a secretive meeting. "It is a long term plan, admittedly, but I have confidence in its success."

[\_This is absurd.\_] Lest's eye twitched oh so subtly when a third voice joined the conversation. It was that of Gabel Parthe, a third progenitor. The councilman was leaning so far into his screen that his catlike hood was obscuring the feed. [\_We should be moving to eliminate the Seraph immediately, not sitting idly by and waiting for an opportunity. It already nearly ended the world once-\_]

Lest clenched his teeth behind his lips, quietly envisioning himself tearing Gabel's head off his body and throwing it into the river of molten lava outside his palace. Despite being the same rank as him, Lest would never in his years learn to tolerate the other vampire's idiocy. They might be a match physically, but in a true confrontation Lest would have zero difficulty in killing him. No remorse, either.

Before he could say anything, however, Urd spoke on his behalf.

[\_Be silent, Gabel,\_] he said darkly, glaring across the room from his own screen. [\_Let us trust Sir Karr's judgement. Note that he has more experience with quelling uprisings than we do.\_]

Lest smiled smugly as Gabel grumbled his admittances, tapping his cane satisfactorily against the floor. "Indeed, Gabel. I was the one sent here, after all. Not you."

It was petty on his part, and probably unnecessary, but he relished in seeing the third progenitor glower at him in silence. Behind him, he heard Ferid chuckle softly under his breath.

[\_This meeting is over,\_] Urd sighed, putting a hand to his head. [\_Gabel, you are dismissed.\_]

Progenitor Parthe grumbled something about upstarts and logged out of the video feed, and then it was just Lest and Urd. He was about to leave the room himself when the Russian caught his attention once more.

[\_Before you leave, Lest,\_] he said, speaking informally now that they were alone, [\_How is Lady Tepes fairing under your care?\_]

This time Lest let his teeth show. "Not so well, I'm afraid. We're in the process of torturing her. Minimal blood, just enough to keep her from turning."

Urd exhaled audibly through his nostrils, shaking his head. [\_A shame, really. Krul was always such a good friend to me. Her treachery hurt me more than it should have.\_]

"Good friends don't break taboos," Lest pointed out. Ferid grinned.

The second progenitor cast a somewhat disapproving glance in Ferid's direction, then said, [\_I suppose not. Good luck, Lest. I have faith in your ability to control this situation.\_]

"Much appreciated, Urd."

The video feed cut out, and the council meeting was over.

As Lest rose out of his chair and retrieved his top hat, Ferid came around behind him and asked, "My king?"

"Yes?" he acknowledged, setting his hat on top of his head.

"You said you had decided on a plan," Ferid elaborated, his eyes like the slits of a cat's. "I was merely curious as to what it was."

Lest regarded his subordinate for a long while. Despite the drastic differences in their power levels, he would never allow himself to lower his guard around the seventh progenitor. Intelligence was often more than enough to gap bridges in strength. The fact that Ferid had been able to dethrone Krul was enough evidence to go on.

"Yes, I suppose you should be aware of the plan," he murmured, taking his cane and heading for the door. "Walk with me, Ferid. I will fill you in on the way."

"Where are we going, my lord?" Ferid asked curiously, tagging along behind him.

Lest's fangs poked through his lips.

"To see our 'dear friend,' of course."

\* \* \*

><p>They left the hotel building later than morning, after having breakfast and hunting around the general area for more supplies. Carrying enough food to last them was one thing, but there were other things people needed to survive.<p>

As promised, Yuu came to wake Shinoa up about an hour and a half after she fell asleep. She was actually incredibly reluctant to leave the bed at that point, as she had slept rather soundly during that hour and a half, and Yuu practically had to drag her into the hall by her ankles.

He was laughing the whole time, though, so she supposed he didn't really mind.

Breakfast was a simple serving of ramen, which Kimizuki made using a portable hot plate he had picked up a while back, the kind that ran on batteries. Unfortunately, the general lack of usable batteries meant that he had to use the hot plate sparingly, and conversation was scant as the group sipped begrudgingly on lukewarm noodles.

"We're almost to Sanguinem," Mitsuba muttered, stabbing at her serving. "I can't believe we're actually doing this."

"Well, you aren't exactly obligated to go," Kimizuki said dryly.

"I know. But it's not like I can just leave you and Yuu to go in by yourselves."

"Hmm. Much obliged."

"You've got a noodle on your face," Shinoa sighed, reaching up and picking it off Yuu's cheek.

She stuck it in her mouth without thinking and swallowed, only to be met with deafening silence.

When she looked, the entire group was gaping at her, mouths wide. Mitsuba had stopped saying whatever it was she was about to say, and instead seemed about ready to explode.

"W-W-W-Wh-" the blonde stammered, tripping over the own tongue. "What the \_hell\_ was that Shinoa?"

The sergeant flushed badly, finally realizing what she had just done without thinking it through first. "Umâ€¦it's not what you thinkâ€¦" she said weakly, holding her hands up in defense.

"Yuu! Do you have nothing to say for yourself?" Mitsuba snapped, rounding on the swordsman.

He just reddened slightly and looked away, muttering something along the lines of "I didn't really mindâ€¦"

As Mitsuba proceeded to flip out, Mikaela glared jealously in Shinoa's direction, and the sergeant sighed in exasperation, thinking it was a good thing she had chosen to sleep in.

\* \* \*

><p>Some hours later, the group was standing at the edge of a rather large sinkhole, staring out at the other side.<p>

"Do we \_have\_ to go through this?" Mitsuba sighed, eyeing the sinkhole with distaste. "I don't like getting my feet wet."

"We can go around, but it'll add time to our route," Yoichi sighed, turning a map over in his hands. "In the interest of time, crossing here is the best option."

Shinoa exhaled softly through her nose. They were currently standing at the edge of a massive, miles-long sinkhole, set right in the middle of the road that they had been following for the past few hours. It was so large that walking around it was going to take hours. As if that wasn't bad enough, the sinkhole had been flooded by burst pipes and rain over the years, and was now filled to the brim with water.

It was a literal lake, right in the middle of the city, as if God had dropped it there specifically to spite them.

"Okay, everybody. Put your boots on," she instructed, shrugging off her own backpack. Reaching inside, she pulled out the military boots that had been issued by the JIDA, kicking off her own shoes and pulling them on. She hadn't thought she would be using this uniform again so soon, but it was better than having wet socks.

The rest of the squad followed suit, all but Mikaela, who was already wearing boots. The blond vampire was staring with narrowed eyes at the skyscrapers soaring up around them, transfixed on a single point.

Shinoa tried to follow his gaze but saw nothing; the sky was a blank, toneless gray, and the rooftops around them appeared empty. "Is something wrong?" she asked him.

Mikaela scanned the area once more, then shook his head. "No. Nothing's wrong," he said.

By now everyone had their boots on, and they began filing slowly down into the sinkhole, hopping down the piles of broken street to get to the bottom. Before they entered the water, Shinoa grabbed a long, rusty pipe and poked it into the liquid, testing its depth.

"It's shallow," she called out behind her, then stepped lightly into the water. It came up to about her shins, which were protected by the boots. As long as there was no splashing they would be fine. "Single file, behind me. I'll test the depth as we go. Wouldn't want anybody falling into a pit."

"How pleasant," Mikaela muttered sarcastically, falling into line behind her.

"Well, you know me. Little miss sunshine," she sang, but received only a muted response. She pouted; Yuu was usually more receptive of her jokes.

They began wading across the artificial lake, little ripples of water waving out from where their legs swept through. Shinoa stared down at their feet as they walked; the surface of the sinkhole seemed to be just rocks and broken remnants of streetlamp, and there were no signs of life. The humps of empty cars rose above the water here and there, and further out than that, a ring of desolate skyscrapers surrounded them, like great sleeping beasts.

Shinoa eyed one of them nervously as they passed. It was leaning dangerously to the side, and although it had probably been like that for a while, she couldn't shake the feeling that it was going to collapse and crush them all in an instant.

\_Oh, such a positive mindset. You go, Shinoa.\_

\_"So tell me, Mikaela," she said out loud, so that only the vampire could hear, "Do you have any friends besides Yuu?"

It was a sort of loaded question, but she was asking out of curiosity as to whether Mikaela considered them his friends or not. Probably not, but a girl could dream, right?

"Not really?" he grunted, and ended it there.

\_Figures.\_

It was still miles until they reached the other end of the sinkhole. Shinoa couldn't see where it ended, but what little of the sun that could break through the clouds was reflected on the water ahead of them, and if she pretended hard enough it looked like they were walking through the ocean, towards the horizon. The buildings around them were reflected almost perfectly in the still, undisturbed water, and she imagined they were like pilgrims walking through a lush valley, except the horizon was concrete and the mountains were



skyscrapers.

It was oddly beautiful, in its own way. There was a certain elegance to chaos.

"Well, I suppose there might be one," Mikaela said suddenly, so softly she almost missed it.

"Hmm?" she prompted, happy to get the boy talking. The others were a little further behind, and thus out of earshot.

The young vampire paused, as if unsure whether to continue. "You'd laugh. But she's a vampire. Third progenitor Krul Tepes."

Shinoa blinked, pausing herself to probe the ground in front of them. "As in the \_the \_Krul Tepes? Vampire queen of Japan?"

"Former," he corrected. "She was dethroned, by two other vampires who were her rivals. I imagine Ferid Bathory is the ruler now, or perhaps another progenitor from elsewhere was sent over. Either way, Krul's reign is over."

"Ah," Shinoa said gingerly, not quite sure how to respond to the news. Mikaela certainly didn't hold back with his words. "If you don't mind me asking, is she?"

"Dead?" he asked bluntly. "I don't know. I would like to think she's alive; vampires prefer not to eliminate their own kind. If she is alive, though, she's probably being held prisoner somewhere. She was charged with treason for having ties to the humans."

Shinoa was reminded that Mikaela had lived a life too, all those years he had been apart from Yuu. There were things about the boy she or maybe even Yuu didn't know yet.

"Is she important to you?" she asked, sweeping the water with her pipe.

Surprisingly enough, Mikaela smiled genuinely at the question. "At first I didn't really know. She saved my life by forcing me to drink her blood, but even after that I tried for years to prevent myself from turning into a true vampire. She could have forced me to drink human blood, but she entertained me instead. She gave me all the blood I wanted. I think she was more amused by my stubbornness than anything else."

"But why did she save your life?"

"At first I thought it was because I carried the Seraph gene." Mikaela shrugged. "Krul made a deal with the humans regarding the Seraph before the virus came, which is why she is now charged with treason. I spent some years believing I was just an insurance tool to her, until I found out the truth."

"The truth," Shinoa echoed, her boots sloshing through the water.

Mikaela's smile turned more wry. "Vampire blood, Hiiragi-san. It changes a person's basic chemistry. The moment I turned, I no longer carried the Seraph gene. It was invalidated by Krul's blood. Now, I

know what you're thinking. She had no reason to save me, then. I don't really believe she did it out of compassion either; but of all the vampires I've met, she's the only one who has ever tried to look out for me."

She walked in silence for a while, and Shinoa tried to imagine herself in Mikaela's shoes, alone in a world full of vampires, almost being one herself, but trying her damndest not to turn fully. In a world like that, in a life like that, she would have felt incredibly alone. Surrounded by monsters, in danger of becoming one herself. Under such circumstances, someone like Krul Tepes might have been very special to her, as well.

The shining light in the tunnel of darkness.

Was Krul Tepes Mikaela's Mahiru?

"If you knew she was alive," she asked hesitantly, "And you could find her—would you want to go save her?"

"In a perfect world," the vampire replied. "But this world is far from perfect."

So even Mikaela had someone he had lost, someone waiting for him to come for them, sitting just out of their reach. He would probably sacrifice everything if it meant saving Krul, too. It felt like everywhere she looked she found people who were willing to resort to self destruction to get what they wanted. Even Yoichi. She and Mitsuba were the only ones who shirked away from that idea, the idea of being reckless with life, all for one single idealized goal.

It was probably because the people they had wanted to protect were dead already. It was over for them. Mitsuba's old team was dead. Shinoa's sister was dead. The greatest finality lay in death. There were no arguments to be had with the grim reaper. Shinoa knew this intimately. She had taken enough vampire's lives with her scythe, like she was a pupil of the reaper himself.

She noticed then that Mikaela had slowed down, allowing the rest of the team to catch up with them. She looked back at him curiously, but the blond simply waved at her to keep going.

Once they started walking again, she heard Mikaela murmur,

"Yoichi, in five seconds, the skyscraper to our right. Twentieth floor. Two targets, both female."

It came out of nowhere, but the information rippled through all of them, and they knew what was about to happen. Shinoa took her scythe out of her pocket, and she heard the gentle rasp of Yuu's sword as he loosened his scabbard.

Five footsteps later Yoichi turned on one heel, his bow materializing in his hand. A plume of water rose upward as he planted one foot as quickly as he could manage, drawing back on the string. A targeting symbol appeared before his eye for a split second, before he fired three arrows at the spot Mikaela had specified earlier.

The bolts flew outward almost instantaneously, diving in through the windows of the twentieth floor before exploding into a ball of flame.

Huge jets of fire flared out through the windows, and there was a deep rumble as the entire building shook on its foundations, chunks of rubble flying into the air and peppering the water below.

Unfortunately, Yoichi was not fast enough. Two dark figures leapt out of harm's way an instant before the arrows struck, so quickly that they looked like blurs to the human eye, but Mikaela was far from human.

"North building!" he barked, and Yoichi fired without aiming this time, trusting the vampire's judgment. The smaller building to the first skyscraper's north was soon engulfed in flames, the entire rooftop swallowed inside a thick plume of smoke.

The two figures were forced to adjust their course, as their original landing spot was now reduced to a fiery graveyard. There were no more buildings nearby, so they were forced to drop down onto the water instead, about forty yards in front of them.

Only then could Shinoa get a good look at them.

It occurred to her that they had actually met before.

"Really, Horn. You went and got us caught," Chess Belle complained, sighing in an exaggerated manner. She hitched up the bottom of her dress and made a face. "And you've got my dress all wet too! This was a gift from master Crowley, you know!"

"I don't really think this is the time to be arguing about this," said the blonde noble standing beside her. Horn Skuld eyed the children standing not too far from them.

That seemed to break some sort of spell, and Shinoa spun her scythe until it enlarged to full size.

"Progenitors!" she shouted, backing up several steps. Behind her, she heard the sounds of everyone else drawing their weapons, even Mikaela, who usually helped out in a fight as a last resort. "Defensive formations!"

The entire squad fell in behind her in a flurry of movement, and then they had turned into a bristling wall of blades, water rippling wildly around their legs.

Horn sighed when she saw this, taking out her whip. "Oh, now look what you've done. They've all drawn their weapons."

"Looks like they want to play," Chess said eagerly, drawing her sword. "Shall we indulge them?"

Shinoa bared her teeth, holding her scythe closer to her chest as curse marks began creeping up the sides of her face. Crowley Eusford might not be here to pose a threat this time, but that didn't mean they could underestimate his attendants. These two were still vampire nobles, as unassuming as they may appear.

Behind her, she noticed suddenly that Mika seemed to be breathing with more difficulty than was logical, like he was suffocating on something. She didn't dare turn to check on him, unwilling to take

her eyes off of their enemies for a second, but she wondered what was wrong with him.

Horn shook her head, reaching up to toss her golden hair behind her shoulder. "Not this time, Chess. We have orders not to engage them. Unless you think you can subdue them without killing anybody?"

"Ehhhhâ€| " Chess pouted, sounding truly disappointed. "Well, killing them is always so much easier to doâ€| "

"My point exactly," Horn sighed, turning away from the humans. "Come now, Chess. We should leave before they decide to attack us first."

"I guess," Chess said forlornly, sheathing her weapon. She turned and stuck her tongue out at them, wagging it between her two fangs. "See you around, little children! We'll play next time, I promise."

Shinoa felt her heart flutter in relief when the two progenitors turned away from them and started dashing across the shallow surface of the water, moving so quickly they parted the water like jet skis. Soon they had receded into the distance, and in a few more moments they would be out of sight.

Before she could breathe out a sigh of relief, however, another figure began dashing after them.

Mikaela swore once quietly under his breath, as if cursing the fact that he was about to do this, then sheathed his sword and began sprinting after the two vampires.

"Whatâ€| wait! Mika!" Yuu shouted, reaching out to grab the blond, but he was much too slow; the vampire was already far out of reach, blasting across the flooded sinkhole towards the smaller specks in the distance, his movements a blur to their inferior eyesight.

"God damn it!" Mitsuba swore, slamming her axe into the water. "Does stupidity run in your family or something?"

Shinoa stepped forward instinctively, her foot splashing softly in the water, but she froze immediately afterwards, her hand rigid in the air before her. Was it the right decision to chase after Mikaela? Powerful as he was, the blond was not powerful enough to take on two nobles on his own. But dragging everyone else into this fight could result in even more casualties. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if one of them got killed because of a decision she had made-

More splashing behind her, and Yuu was running after his brother, sword drawn and ready to kill.

She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she allowed Yuu to get hurt, either.

Shrinking her scythe and stuffing it into a pocket, she began sprinting after him.

She didn't issue any verbal commands, but soon enough she heard the

rest of the squad following close behind her. They caught up with Yuu quickly, but by now Mikaela was far ahead of them, nearly hundreds of yards to the north, beneath the colossal shadow of a half collapsed skyscraper sticking out of the water.

"This one doesn't know when to give up," Horn snarled, glancing behind her to find that Mikaela was gaining on them.

"Say," Chess said out loud, as if something had just occurred to her. "Didn't Lord Crowley's orders say to avoid killing just the humans?"

The two progenitors shared a glance, and a silent understanding passed between them.

Mika balked when the two vampires dashing ahead of him suddenly stopped on a dime, both of them drawing their blades and swinging for his head. He was moving so quickly at this point that it was nearly impossible for him to stop, and before he knew it he was barreling straight towards the cold steel of Chess's sword, inches away from having his head taken off.

Pitching forward, he dove at the last moment, managing to use his momentum to knock Horn off her feet. They both fell hard into the water, soaking their clothes instantly, but this was hardly the time to care about that.

Not even stopping to toss the water out of his eyes, Mikaela drew his sword and slashed blindly at where Horn had landed, its tentacles lashing out to drink greedily at his blood.

Before the blade met the vampire's flesh, however, Chess Belle dove between them and brought her own weapon up in defense.

Their swords crossed with enough force to crush mountains, and Mika had to narrow his eyes when the recoil caused the water to explode outward around them. Through his watery vision, he saw Chess grinning smugly at him, her eyes filled with the wild light of bloodlust.

Before he could regain his footing, Chess spun forward and began to attack him from all sides, forcing him to step back and parry the blows coming his way. The strikes seemed to come at lightning speed; the moment he blocked one attack another blade was arcing towards his legs, then his chest, and even his vampiric reflexes were barely enough to keep himself from losing a limb.

Finding that Mika was sufficiently distracted, Horn picked herself up from the water, tossing her soaked hair out of her eyes. The usually composed woman seemed genuinely irritated now, and his heart sank once he realized that it was now two against one. He had squandered the only advantage he had had going into this fight.

"No more false brethren," Horn seethed, drawing her sword. "We'll teach you the power of a noble."

"How about you teach me instead," Yuu snarled, before swinging for Horn's head.

The progenitor whirled around and parried the blow before it could

connect, and for a tiny fraction of time she saw the well known face of Hyakuya Yuu, the curse marks crawling across his skin, teeth bared, hair billowing behind him like a dark flame.

The face of the boy who could end the world.

Then the moment was past, and the two of them became embroiled in a flurry of traded blows, their swords smashing together with such force that sparks sprayed across their feet, only to be snuffed out by the water.

\_Gods. His swordplay is formidable,\_ Horn thought angrily, struggling to fend off the boy's reckless attacks. Her own prowess at combat was admittedly paltry compared to most nobles, so she would have to rely on her natural advantages to win this fight. Pursing her lips, she began to steadily increase the speed of her attacks, seeking to conquer Yuu's instincts through sheer force alone.

At first it seemed to work. The boy's breaths came in short, harsh gasps, and the purple curse marks grew until they reached all the way across his face. Finally his movements began to lose their ferocious edge, until at last Horn spotted an opening in his previously impervious defense.

Baring her teeth, she lunged forward to exploit it.

Rather than attempting to parry the blow, however, Yuu simply dodged it, throwing his body to the side. Horn's sword missed entirely, her momentum carrying her past the boy's chest until it dove beneath the surface of the water and struck the concrete.

"Shinoa!"

A petite girl wielding a massive scythe bounded over Yuu's crouched body, twirling her weapon in a deadly whirlwind around her person. She was upon Horn in an instant, swinging with the intent to kill, and the progenitor could barely yank her sword out of the ground in time to defend herself.

Horn did not hold back this time, but the girl's movement speed seemed to be on par with her own somehow, and it occurred to her that she must have taken one of those damn pills the humans had invented to even the playing field. The scythe wielder's face was throbbing brightly with curse marks, and her weapon wove a web around her small body, its unusual shape making her attacks nearly impossible to predict. Horn snarled as she found herself being pushed back, step by step, the distance between herself and Chess closing by the minute.

Chess, on the other hand, was still busy trying to fend off Mika, who had renewed his attacks on her with fury.

"My, aren't you motivated!" she exclaimed, holding one hand to her mouth in mock surprise. She was still fighting only one handed, and she had yet to feel like she should be taking this fight seriously. Mika might have been bred on the blood of Krul Tepes, but he was not a progenitor. Chess had the advantage.

Mika was well aware of this, as well as how stupid it was for him to chase after Chess and Horn. It was something Yuu would have done, but

Yuu wasn't wrong about everything. Sometimes you couldn't abandon the people you cared about.

Their swords clashed again, locking together, the blades shaking dangerously with the force being applied to them. "You monsters," he seethed, pressing forward as hard as he could, but failed to break Chess's block. "I know you have Krul. Where is she? Where are you keeping her?"

The blue haired vampire raised her eyebrows, and this time she seemed genuinely caught off guard. "Lady Krul? You mean the traitor? Why would you care about her?"

She punctuated the question with a dizzying array of slashes, her sword dancing a disorienting circle around Mika. He failed to block all of them, and he paid the price when Chess's blade caught him on the right thigh, biting clean through the flesh and drawing blood.

Mika cried out and leapt backward, putting distance between them, but landed awkwardly on his injured leg. He felt the wound, felt the blood staining his fingers there, and glared hatefully at his opponent. Chess just smiled amiably back at him, lifting her sword as if to goad him on, the tip of her blade stained red with his lifeblood.

"Chess!" Horn shouted, her voice almost swallowed by the sound of clashing blades. "I'm being outnumbered here!"

She wasn't exaggerating, either. Yuu, Shinoa, Kimizuki, and Mitsuba were all simultaneously assaulting the vampire from four sides, darting in and out in a crazy dance, striking where she was the most unbalanced. Horn's superior reflexes were allowing her to cope, but she had already sustained wounds in several areas, and due to the curse of the demon weapons the cuts did not heal, instead dripping blood into the water that pooled outward like dark roses, as if the ground by her feet were sprouting into the garden from Shinoa's dreams.

"Help me!" Horn added, barely swatting aside a succession of blows from Kimizuki.

"Shut up, you damn vampire," the bespectacled boy growled, trying to sweep her legs out from under her, only for Horn to lash out with a foot and kick him back several steps.

Not intending to let Chess pull Horn out of a bind, Mika ignored the pain in his leg and charged, overflowing his sword with as much blood as he could manage. He lunged forward and stabbed for the vampire's heart, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Really, Horn. You're no fun," Chess sighed, flicking blood off her sword.

A moment before Mika's blade found her heart, she ducked beneath the attack and kicked him squarely in the chest, so hard that his entire body was stopped in midair, and he heard a sickening crunching sound come from below his collarbone. Then the wind was driven out of his lungs, and he was flying backwards, careening through the air before crashing painfully into the water with a great splash.

"Mika!" Yuu screamed, turning to look for his brother, but his attention was quickly diverted back to blocking Horn's attacks.

Several yards away, Mika lay gasping in the shallow water, struggling to catch a simple breath. He didn't want to look down at himself, didn't dare to; he knew that the kick from Chess had crushed his chest cavity. Even now he could feel his body going into emergency mode, flying to heal the wound before it claimed his life. He was bleeding profusely into the water, and he couldn't tell if his clothes were soaked with that or blood anymore.

He would probably survive this, but for now he could only lay there and fight for breath, or close his eyes and brave the waves of pain that flew outwards from his destroyed heart.

Turning away from Mika with a smirk, Chess began sprinting towards Horn, knowing that now the fight would turn in their favor.

"Oh, no you don't," Yoichi murmured, before firing.

He was crouching atop the hump of a half submerged car, where he had retreated after the fight began, knowing that his worth was greater at long distances. Until now the vampires had failed to even notice him, because it was easy to forget about his subtle presence, which was the perfect attribute for a sniper to have. It was one of the few times he was glad for his lack of presence.

He let go of the arrows a moment later, aiming precisely at the spot between Horn and Chess's eyes, intending to take them both out together.

Adrenaline surged through Chess's system once she noticed the two arrows screaming towards them, and she knew immediately that it was too late to dodge. She had to remove both herself and Horn from this situation alive, but it seemed she would be unable to do so without suffering a few scratches. Well, not that it really mattered. Horn was plenty scratched up already.

Leaning back, she slammed on the brakes of her dash, coming to an incredibly abrupt stop just behind Horn's body. The move sent a huge wave of water flying forward towards the humans, and they all lifted their hands to shield their faces before the water struck them, giving her the window of time she needed.

Not wasting a single millisecond, Chess grabbed Horn by the wrist and swung her sword in a wide arc in front of them.

The area around the two vampires exploded into a thick fireball of flames, and the rest of Yoichi's team staggered backwards from the point of impact, diving into the water to avoid suffering serious burns. He hadn't wanted to fire with his friends so close, but he had to in order to make sure the tide did not turn against them. He lowered his bow slightly, narrowing his eyes at the thick column of smoke he had created.

He saw Mitsuba whoop in victory, but he wasn't so sure just yet. Something was nagging at him. Some instinct that told him this wasn't over yet. Could it meanâ€¦|



"No!" Mika murmured, having finally recovered from his injuries, picking himself up gingerly from the ground.

Two streaks of smoke jetted out from the fireball, and out of those streaks emerged the forms of Chess Belle and Horn Skuld, one holding tightly onto the other. The two vampires leapt towards the side of the skyscraper that had been looming over them during the duration of the battle, aiming for one of its broken windows.

Chess alighted upon the fifth floor with Horn still held tightly in her hands, and a moment later they dove into the darkness of the ruined building.

Yoichi gaped, unable to comprehend how they had survived the explosion. It had been a direct hit! He had seen it with his own eyes!

Only Mikaela, who had been watching from behind, knew that Chess had cut the arrows out of the air a half second before they hit their intended targets, thus minimizing the damage the resulting explosion inflicted upon them.

Shinoa fell to one knee in exhaustion, using the length of her scythe to keep herself upright. That was the hardest she had fought in months, the hardest since she had faced off against even stronger progenitors at the airport. She didn't look forward to doing it again.

Unfortunately, Mika wasn't inclined to indulge her, because the moment he could walk again he was leaping away from the water, giving chase.

"I hate your family, Yuu," Mitsuba grumbled, her deep blue eyes tracking Mika until he, too, disappeared inside the building.

"Yoichi, go climb another building and give us support from above," Shinoa snapped, sending the archer running to find a higher perch. "Yuu, you're with me. We're taking the west side of the building. Mitsuba and Kimizuki, you take the east. We'll catch the vampires in a pincer maneuver and finish them."

Her team nodded in agreement, and then they all started running towards the base of the building. They couldn't leap dozens of feet in the air like Mikaela could, meaning they would have to take the stairs.

They charged in through the nonexistent front doors of the skyscraper, their boots sloshing through the water. The first floor of the building was completely flooded as well, all the way to the door that led into the staircase.

As Shinoa smashed it to pieces with her scythe to let them through, only a single thought dominated her mind.

\_Don't die for Krul, Mika. She isn't worth it.\_

\* \* \*

><p>AN

Whew. This chapter ended up being a lot longer than I expected. I hope you guys don't mind. This is closer to the "true" length of my chapters, which is to say they usually hover at around ~10,000 words, just not at first. It would be easy for me to just break them up, though.

I pretty much have four different plotlines running simultaneously right now. Hopefully I don't get them all tangled up...

Anyways, thanks for reading! Tell me what you think.

~Banshee

#### 4. Fear

"Can vampires feel emotion? Due to the relative lack of true research on the topic (as well as the virtual nonexistence of testimonials from actual vampires), there is insufficient evidence to properly support either answer to the question. Perhaps our distant cousins are truly as callous as they appear on their exterior, or perhaps they simply possess a fundamentally different interpretation of the concept of 'emotion.'

One may also consider the origins of emotion, particularly those of love, hatred, happiness and sadness, most or all of which have some root in survival instinct. It is well known that vampires dislike increasing their numbers, which seems to stand in contradiction to the general principle of most reproducing species, although they do not reproduce in the traditional sense. In this way it could be argued that they lack the capacity for emotion, as there was no evolutionary pressure to necessitate it; however, vampires are obviously also able to prioritize, and protect those resources or individuals they deem important to their survival. Therefore it is presumable that value has meaning to them, though it is impossible to determine whether this value is purely pragmatic or deals in some degree of personal bias.

Ultimately, until extensive psychological analysis can be performed upon the subject (an unlikely possibility in the near future, considering the current war), there is no conclusive method available to determine this. However, the one thing we do know is that while humans and vampires do share some distant relation, whether that connection be evolutionary or intentional, we are also fundamentally different from each other. Even if it may be proven that vampires feel as well and as deeply as we do, it is more than likely that they feel very differently than us."

-Shinoa Hiiragi, excerpt from an in-class essay assignment

"Fearâ€¦fear is an emotion crafted for humans. It is a sensation befitting of cattle and livestock. Not something very easily prescribed to vampires, but as I lay there, watching my soul blacken and turn into a demonâ€¦I will admit that I felt very human."

-Asura Tepes

\* \* \*

## <p>Chapter 4: Fear<p>

Krul wished she had some literature at hand.

When studying the cultural nuances of a population or race, researchers generally attempted to pore over the literature that was produced by said race, as it was a glimpse into the thoughts and minds of the culture. Krul knew this well; she had read her fair share of human literature in her time, mostly whenever she grew bored of common vampiric texts, though she did not claim to understand what she read. The values she found within those novels weren't the ones her race shared.

If anything, it helped to deepened the line between them.

Still, there was one thing Krul would always remember from her varied readings, and it was their races' varying interpretations of light and darkness. Human stories always seemed to revel in the existence of light; it meant the sun, it meant brightness, sight, awareness, warmth and summer. It made sense, as humans were woefully hapless in the dark.

Vampires, on the other hand, preferred the darkness. They had begun as night hunters, after all, thousands of years ago, before there were nobles or progenitors or even underground cities, when their kind used to live in the depths of dark forests and hunted anything that walked. The darkness was their cloak. It gave Krul comfort. Few things could do that for her, after living for so many centuries.

One eye rolled back in her head, and she shook it to refocus her sight. Her thoughts were wandering again. She was going to become senile, sitting here alone in this dungeon. She wasn't particularly old, but she wasn't very young anymore either. Lest held that distinction.

Thinking about the third progenitor made the hairs rise on the back of her neck, and she regained a little more composure.

Outside, just past, the wall of bulletproof glass that separated her from the rest of the world, someone had set up an intense set of lights, angled so that they poured into the cell and bathed every available corner. The bulb itself was massive, large enough to stand above Krul's own petite form, and it was unbearably strong; the light seemed to burn her skin, like they had saddled the sun and brought it all the way down here for the sole purpose of torturing her even further.

In order to escape the miniature sun, she had taken to pulling up the bedsheets and curling up in the corner with it wrapped around her small body, trying to shield her sensitive skin from the harmful rays. It helped some, and though the guards shouted at her to stop it at first she simply ignored them, and after some time they had given up.

It was a petty victory, but she would take what she could get.

Krul had the blanket wrapped around her head like a hood, and she

turned her nose against the wall, staring at its blank surface sightlessly. She slept a lot more now, since her diet had been slashed so severely; almost all the time she slept, and when she was awake she felt languid, like a puddle of flesh. It was all part of breaking her, she knew, but sometimes it was hard to remember that.

The progenitor pressed her forehead against the wall, closing her eyes, hoping to dream this time about blond hair and blue eyes.

Never mind. The sound of the door opening, and then a young voice ordering the guards to step outside. Krul knew that voice. She knew it very well.

Turning her head and peeking through the edge of her hood, she spied Lest Karr walking in to stand on the other side of the glass.

"Hello, Krul," he said airily, leaning on his cane.

The area directly behind the giant light was swathed in darkness, and the vampire's eyes were the only thing she could see clearly, gleaming through the glass.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Krul let her head fall back against the wall, fully intending to go back to sleep.

Lest just clucked his tongue, walking over to a chair and sitting down in it. He crossed his legs and laid his cane across his lap, shaking his head in exasperation. "Really, Krul. Your successor comes to visit and you can't even manage a simple hello?"

Krul almost didn't reply to that either, but she opened her dry, sticky mouth a moment later. "You aren't my successor. You're my usurper."

The vampire chuckled softly, a soft sound that arose from the darkness. The darkness she missed so much. "Yes, I suppose. I don't expect you to be happy to see me. But for what it counts, I'm happy to see you. In this state, that is."

Krul clenched her fists beneath the blanket, resisting the urge to rise up and scream bloody murder at him. That was what he wanted. Lest would get nothing from her.

"Is that why you're here? To watch me suffer?"

Lest's teeth flashed through the glass. She imagined her own meeting his neck. "Partly, I admit. But not entirely, no. I came to ask for a second opinion."

A strand of dirty pink hair fell across Krul's face, as she waited for an elaboration.

"Five months ago, the day the humans succeeded on creating the Seraph of the End," Lest began, bemusement in his voice, "A certain group of humans seceded from the Demon Army. And also joining them, though I'd imagine with some reluctance, was a certain vampire who was under your care."

Krul felt her heart clench painfully in her chest, and for the first time in over eight hundred years she felt—was it fear? Fear for whom? Herself? A noble did not fear death. She would die with dignity. No—it was fear for Mika, fear for another, and it felt so foreign.

Lest hummed at her silence. "You know, I never met Mikaela, but I've heard about his eccentricity. It was even more severe than yours, I've been told. And from my experience, eccentricity is dangerous. It leads to change. And vampires live best without change."

The pink haired vampire snorted from behind her blanket. "Then why haven't you killed Ferid yet?"

A smile. "Ferid is dangerous, I admit. A seventh progenitor who can dethrone you is a force to be reckoned with. But Ferid has never had dealing with humans like you or Mikaela. And I know how to keep him in check."

Neither of those statements are true, Krul thought, closing her eyes again. They were throbbing.

Lest sighed, folding his hands on his lap. "Unfortunately, war tends to bring change. Still, I cannot allow too many eccentricities to exist. They tend to be unpredictable. Which is why I'm considering terminating Mikaela."

Krul's eyes flew open, and before she could stop herself she had turned to stare at Lest, the terror evident on her face.

He just laughed blissfully, throwing his head back so far he almost lost his hat. "At last, a reaction out of you! I was beginning to think you had passed out."

"You won't touch a single hair on Mika's head," Krul snarled, not caring about showing emotion anymore. She had already tipped her hand.

Lest smirked at her. "Crowley Eusford has had two of his attendants tracking Mikaela's group for weeks now. We could strike whenever I so please. But don't worry; I won't kill him immediately. He still has his part to play."

The progenitor left his chair and began pacing behind the light, leaving his cane balanced on the seat. It betrayed the fact that he didn't actually need it. It revealed that oftentimes, his apparent weaknesses were merely traps meant to lure one in.

"In two weeks, the southern coalition will march on Sanguinem," he said, stopping just behind the light. There he was nearly invisible. "It is the only vampiric city held by the humans. I intend to reverse that."

Krul merely glowered. "You can't win. The Seraph will destroy you all."

Lest sighed, his shoulders drooping. "Give me more credit, Krul. I don't intend to face the humans while they have access to the Seraph."

Krul stared at him, watched his body language, and couldn't read any of it. "Why are you telling me this?"

Lest grinned, facing her and putting a finger against one of his fangs. "Who knows? Leave the answer to that question to fate—and to your superiors. Goodbye, Krul. I'll be sure to give Mika your farewells."

The glass wall shuddered when Krul leapt forward and crashed against it, her claws scratching the impenetrable surface. "Don't you dare hurt him!" she screamed, struggling to get through to him, but it was too thick and she was too weak.

Lest's hysterical laughter echoed off the walls of the cell as he disappeared into the hall, the door falling shut behind him.

"Careful, Krul. You're beginning to look more human by the minute."

Krul stood in front of the glass for several minutes, now alone, chest heaving with exertion. She was going to be exhausted now; she had been trying to conserve her energy, but had ended up blowing it all on one pointless outburst. But she didn't care anymore. She didn't know.

She couldn't think straight.

Turning away from the glass, she picked up her blanket and curled up in the corner again, trying desperately to hide from the light. She lay there, bathed in the whiteness, separated by a wall from the black.

If someone saw her now, would they see good or evil?

Well, it would depend on who it was.

\* \* \*

><p>Even when Mika had still been aligned with the Kansai vampires, he had never been particularly fond of Chess Belle.<p>

There was just something about her easy aloofness, the sureness with which she viewed the world, that irritated him. She was so convinced that the way she saw the world was the correct way. Never once did she consider humans as nothing more than livestock. Never once did she imagine that it was possible for her lord, Crowley, to fall. Never once did she consider that emotion played a part in the hearts of men.

And perhaps his own heart, as well.

Though to be fair, most vampires were like that. As Mika leapt onto the fifth floor with his sword in hand, he knew this was very true. But Chess was worse somehow. There was a reservedness to the arrogance of most vampires. Chess was defined by her playfulness. She enjoyed being the hunter.

Having spend much of his life being hunted, Mika couldn't help hating

Chess.

It appeared that the partially submerged skyscraper had once been a large office building; rows and rows of abandoned cubicles lined the room he found himself in. Long fluorescent lights were dangling from the ceiling, and there was a water cooler tucked against the wall to his right, still half full, as if waiting for someone to come and relieve their thirst, unaware that the world had ended.

A crash up in front of him, but by the time he looked there was only a wildly swinging door that Chess and Horn had run straight through, obviously intent on escaping. A smart move on their part; both progenitors could have fallen to Yoichi's arrows, if not for Chess's quick thinking.

Gripping his sword, Mika bared his teeth and sprinted after them, blowing down the center row of cubicles and crashing through the door.

A gleaming white blade swept up towards his chin the moment he broke through, and Mika just barely raised his own sword to parry the blow, leaning back and sliding to safety.

Horn cursed when her attack failed, moving aside to block the door he had just run through. Her sword arm appeared to be injured; the vampire had clutching her right shoulder with her free hand, fingers gripping gingerly at the hilt. Chess had been able to save her, but only just.

Mika settled into a defensive stance, only to hear the rasping of another sword behind him, and Chess Belle was stalking slowly behind him, so that he was now flanked on both sides.

"Really, Mikaela," Chess clucked, shaking her head in exasperation. "When are you ever going to learn?"

The blond snarled quietly, knowing it had been stupid of him to fall for the same trick twice. But he could barely control himself even now; the desire to know, to force these creatures to tell him where Krul was, had built up so greatly that he wasn't thinking straight.

They were in what appeared to be an old meeting room, with chairs and tables scattered against the scar scored walls. One of the walls was made entirely out of glass, like a massive window, and beyond he could see down to the lake far below.

"Well, not that I really blame you," Chess mused, twirling her sword. "Change doesn't come easy, does it?"

With that they both attacked him, and Mika entered one of the most stacked confrontations of his life.

If both progenitors had been at peak condition, he probably would have died within ten seconds. But luckily Horn was severely injured, and he could tell that Chess had expended a lot of energy to get them both out of trouble. His blade sang a deadly song around his body, as Mika put into practice everything Krul had taught him over the years just barely holding back both of his opponents.

Finally he saw an opening and managed to land a heavy kick to Horn's midsection, sending the blonde staggering back. He whirled around and met Chess's follow up just in time, their blades humming in unison when they crossed each other.

"Not bad, I'll admit," Chess smirked, as they pushed against each other. She was using both hands now. "Krul taught you well. Is that why you care so much for her?"

Mika's pupils dilated and he broke the hold, hacking at the girl's legs, but Chess leapt nimbly out of the way, chuckling hysterically to herself. "She's a vampire, you know! She feels nothing for you. She couldn't even if she wanted to!"

He heard a rustling sound behind him, and knew that Horn was picking herself off the ground. He didn't care what Chess said. He didn't care what other vampires would think. Neither would Krul.

Raising his sword, he prepared himself for the next bloodletting.

\* \* \*

><p>Shinoa could already tell that the pill she had taken earlier was wearing off.<p>

Her legs burned as she and Yuu stormed up the steps of the skyscraper, their footsteps groaning ominously off the concrete walls. They had both sheathed their weapons so they could run faster, but they could still feel the weight of their blades on their bodies, reminding them that death could still be imminent.

In an ideal situation, Shinoa would not have chosen to split her squad up. It was the number one rule anyone learned while fighting for the JIDA; a group of any less than five was likely to die fighting a single noble. But judging from the look on Mika's face, she understood that allowing the two progenitors to escape was not an option this time. She and Yuu would come in from the left, while the rest of them would cover the right. Yoichi would watch from above.

As they approached the fifth floor, Shinoa prayed they would be able to settle this before her pill lost its effect. Otherwise she might have to take a second one to settle the score, and she hadn't exactly done that before. It had never been necessary. She didn't know if her body would be able to handle it. Not everyone got to come back from the dead, not like a certain reckless swordsman.

Yuu had pulled ahead of her on the stairwell, and he reached the door to the fifth floor before she did. He kicked it open and let them in, and for a moment Shinoa saw something indescribable written across his face. It was the same look he wore whenever someone he loved was in danger. The look that said no price was too much. The look that said no life was worth less than his own.

It was the pure, unadulterated willingness to die for a cause, and it made fear sprout in Shinoa's belly.

They ran through a wide room filled with cubicles, weaving their way through the narrow lanes as quickly as they could. The sounds of battle could be heard from up ahead; swords crashing against swords,



high pitched, maniacal laughter.

Ragged breathing.

"Mika!" Yuu said, charging in through the door and into the meeting room. Through the opening Shinoa could see the blond being surrounded by both vampires at once, barely fending them off.

Knowing it was too late to convince Yuu to wait, she grabbed a heavy stapler from a nearby desk and chucked it at the back of Horn's head as hard as she could.

Of course, the progenitor sensed it coming and slashed the stapler out of the air, just moments before it would have collided with her head. Shinoa hadn't actually expected the throw to connect; she wasn't that stupid.

But it did give Yuu the opening he needed. The boy rolled past Horn and came up between her and Mika, then he was on the offensive immediately, driving the vampire away from his brother.

"Yuu!" Mika shouted over his shoulder, as he began to focus on holding off Chess, whose attacks had become noticeably stronger after their arrival. "Be careful!"

\_You're the last person I want to hear that from,\_ Yuu thought, increasing the tempo of his strokes, trying to keep up with Horn. The vampire may be injured, but she was still a noble, and his pill wasn't going to last forever. Curse marks continued to creep steadily across his skin, and Horn bared her teeth in response, sword tip flashing through the air despite her injured shoulder.

Shinoa ran across the room towards Horn, intending to attack her from behind, but before she could Yuu made a mistake.

It was just a tiny error; in his haste to push Horn away from Mika, Yuu lunged forward and overstepped his range, sending his just slightly off balance. A human swordsman might not have even noticed, but vampires were different. Perfection was key when fighting a noble.

Horn's uninjured arm lashed out at the speed of light, and before Shinoa could react she grabbed Yuu and hurled him through the wall, sending him crashing into the room filled with cubicles.

"Yuu!" Shinoa screamed, turning to look through the hole that had been punched through the wall by the door. She heard the sound of crashing plastic, as Yuu's body plowed through the flimsy cubicle walls.

Then it was silent, so terrifyingly silent, and she wanted nothing more than to run to his side and help him, but Horn had other ideas.

Shinoa stopped the vampire's blade without looking, the long blade of her scythe coming up to hug the the blonde's weapon. Horn growled and tried to press, but Shinoa simply disengaged and began swinging wildly, coming at her opponents from every conceivable angle. She didn't know what she was doing; there was no form to her attacks, no pattern, just pure rage and \_fear.\_ Horn's eyes widened and she

stepped back, caught off guard by the pure ferocity of the girl's attacks, but Shinoa didn't register this in her mind. All she knew was that Horn Skuld had to pay. She had to pay for hurting Shinoa's teammate.

She had to pay for hurting Yuu.

\_Damn.\_ Horn felt her heart rate increasing as she continued to fall beneath Shinoa's relentless onslaught, her injured sword arm weakening with every parry. She didn't know if she would be able to keep up for much longer.

The look on the little girl's face was something to see, though. Horn wasn't very articulate in the wide range of human emotions, but she figured that particular expression wasâ€|perhaps fear? Or even hatred? Most likely a mixture of both. The girl's amber colored eyes were drawn wide, the pupils shrunk so far that they were like twin pinpricks in a sea of white, and her teeth were bared so wide she could have passed for a vampire herself.

It was a ferocious expression, one Horn had only seen on human faces, when they were at their most desperate.

It seemed emotion had some utility after all.

Kneeling down, Shinoa swept her scythe at Horn's legs, the blade rushing downward at incredible speed.

The progenitor leapt upward to dodge the attack, but realized too late that this had been part of the girl's plan.

"Go, Shi-chan!" Shinoa snarled, whirling her scythe and holding a hand out before her.

A great, black mass emerged from behind the girl's body and caught Horn in midair, seizing her in its claws and plowing her through the same wall she had just thrown Yuu through. It threw her against the wall and blasted against her until its body ran out, leaving the blonde to slump limply to the ground, dazed by the suddenness of the attack.

Ignoring Mika and Chess for now, Shinoa leapt through the hole in the wall and approached Horn slowly, her scythe at the ready.

Horn raised her head through half closed eyes, squinting as a thin trail of blood began trickling down her face. Shinoa closed in steadily from the far side of the room, her scythe spinning slowly behind her, dusting black flames in her wake that seemed to rise up like death crows on the darkest of nights. She looked like some rogue grim reaper, come to take Horn's soul and punish it for eternity, should she manage to kill her.

The look in the girl's eyes. They were murderous.

The thought gave Horn was motivation, and she tried to get up.

Shinoa saw this and showed her teeth, reaching into her pocket. She had no choice. She would have to take a second pill. Even if it was slightly risky, in theory she should be able to handle it. Few people

had actually died from taking their second pill.

Not that she had the best of luck, but she tried not to think about that.

As Shinoa's fingers reached into her breast pocket, something rustled off to the side, punctuated by a painful groan.

There, buried beneath a small mountain of cubicle walls and rubble, Yuu was slowly pulling himself to freedom, grunting loudly all the way. His leg was still trapped beneath the debris, and he was struggling to pull it free, using his sword to hack at the makeshift chains.

Both Shinoa and Horn saw this at the same moment, and they both had the same, terrible thought.

Their eyes met, from opposite sides of the room, from dark to light.

And Horn grinned at her.

There was a great shockwave of energy as Horn put everything she had into one last spurt, springing to her feet and flying across the room at breakneck speed, straight to the spot where Yuu was still trapped. If she was destined to lose this battle, she would at least take the Seraph gene to the grave with her.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. It was a trite phrase, but almost immediately afterwards Shinoa had dry swallowed her second pill, and it seemed like her brain exploded with processing power, taking in so much information at once that it slowed her perception of time. Her bloodshot eyes tracked Horn's movement across the room, and then her own body was moving, but slowly, so slowly, that she didn't know if she was going to make it in time, if anyone was ever going to make it in time.

Ah. This fear. This deep, ugly sort of fear that she just wanted to repress. Where had she felt this sort of fear before? It was a familiar feeling, like an old enemy, an old scar that still ached during the winter. When had her heart beat in this way in the past?

Yes. She remembered. That fateful night so many years ago, when her own dearly beloved sister had turned into a demon, and Guren had been forced to kill her.

She had been present, within arm's reach even, when Guren's blade entered Mahiru's abdomen and ripped upward, tearing the human turned monster in two. Even if she knew it was wrong, Shinoa had always thought that she could have stopped Guren if she wanted to. And part of her had really wanted to stop Guren in that moment, but her body simply refused to move, and before she knew it she had lost one of the few people she had actually cared about in this world, a world where monsters ate men and became monsters themselves.

She had lived her entire life up until this point believing that there was no point in sacrificing herself for someone else. She had been unable to do it for Mahiru, after all. And she was never going to love someone more than she had loved Mahiru.

It was easier just to protect herself.

But now, as her shoes blazed a trail across the room, as her deep ashen hair billowed behind her like an ancient flame, as her scythe burned with unholy fire, Shinoa had only one thought on her mind. And that was to protect Yuu at any cost, for without him there was no life worth living.

Everything happened in a millisecond, like the taut string of time had been snapped at long last. Horn blasted across the room, Shinoa flew after her, and Yuu watched in horror as both females charted a collision course right in front of him, with no way to tell who would reach him first.

Horn smiled softly again, and angled her sword towards Yuu's chest.

Then Shinoa came roaring in from the side, and, releasing a guttural scream from deep within her chest, cleaved Horn completely in two.

Her scythe came down like the hammer of god, with so much force that it actually ripped through Horn's entire body in a single stroke, entering through the vampire's forehead and crashing down the length of her spine, then past the pelvis, and then her blade was buried throat deep into the ground, and two halves of Horn Skuld were floating in the air before them.

Horn's separated eyes seemed to meet Shinoa's for the smallest of moments, and the lavender haired girl saw something in those eyes she had never seen in a vampire before.

She saw fear.

Then a gentle gust swept through the skyscraper, and Horn Skuld was now ashes, dissipating eternally into the wind.

Shinoa stood there in silence, breathing heavily, the shaft of her scythe slick with sweat. Her heart was beating abnormally fast. She was seeing strange colors.

"Woah," Yuu breathed, frozen in place, not even trying to free his leg anymore. "You saved me."

"Of course I did," Shinoa murmured, swaying on her feet, Curse marks were now reaching all the way across her entire face. "I'm your beloved reliable sergeant"

Eyes rolled back in her head, and then the ground was rushing up to meet her, and the last thing she heard was Yuu's voice calling her name.

\* \* \*

><p>She was trapped within her inner self, and her body was her prison.<p>

The earth and the sky were the same color, a pale baby blue, but where the two extremes met there was only darkness, a black line that

separated one from the other. Only more proof that though light illuminated, it was darkness that divided.

Shikama-Doji was standing a ways ahead of her, still in that same shapeless form she always appeared in. Had she been a more powerful demon, perhaps she would have been able to assume a humanoid form like Asuramaru. Or perhaps Shinoa's own mind was too weak to imagine anything else.

The sergeant remained where she was, standing on the colorless blue, watching her demon quietly. She knew from years of experience that it was usually better to let Shikama take things at her own pace. Besides, things like time didn't exist within this realm.

At last the demon turned to face her, and in her hand she was gripping what appeared to be a glass orb, just about the size of a baseball. Her black claws were wrapped around its surface, but Shinoa could see another darkness inside of it, swirling about and growing stronger by the moment.

They regarded each other, until Shinoa asked the most obvious question at hand.

"Am I dead?"

Shikama shook her head, little trails of black fire floating off her body. [\_No. You survived. But just barely.\_]

It appeared that the demon was more articulate when they were communicating directly like this. Shinoa pursed her lips at the revelation, crossing her arms behind her back. "When will I wake up?"

Shikama turned away and went back to watching the horizon, the black line that broke the light. [\_Soon. Your brain overheated, that was all. Not used to taking two pills.\_]

Shinoa eyed her partner's back carefully. One always had to be careful when trying to read demons. Their set of values was completely different from a human's. "Aren't you going to try and take over my body?" It was what a demon would have done. But Shikama wasn't an ordinary demon. And they had known each other for a long time.

Fingers tightened around the glass orb, drawing Shinoa's amber eyes to it for a second time. She wondered why the demon had it. [\_Do you want me to?\_]

The sergeant sighed. "Shouldn't my answer be obvious?"

Shikama said nothing, just turned the orb over in her hands, as if lost in thought. Assuming demons were capable of that.

Finally Shinoa exhaled impatiently through her nose, failing to comprehend the lengthy silence. "What's wrong, Shi-chan? Why are you being like this?"

The black flames cloaking Shikama's body flared out briefly. [\_I am not sure myself. But I sense that your values are changing.\_]

"â€|What?"

The demon shook herself, as if agitated. [\_You forget that the two of us are linked, Shinoa. I feel what you feel. I felt the fear you just felt. The fear of loss. The fear for another.\_]

Shinoa frowned, raising an eyebrow. She crossed her arms over her chest this time. "So what? I've used your powers to protect my friends before. This is no different."

[\_I know.\_] Shikama looked down at the orb in her hand, and far in the distance the black line seemed to grow thicker. [\_But I always knew you would put yourself first. Now I'm not so sure.\_]

Shinoa watched confusedly as the demon began pacing back and forth, palming the glass orb.

[\_Do you remember the day we contracted, Shinoa? The reason why I chose to lend my powers to you.\_] Shikama paused. [\_I chose you because you also seemed to understand that we are all alone in this world. Your greatest concern was for yourself, as it should be.\_]

Shinoa narrowed her eyes. "I'm a Hiiragi. We tend to be rather selfish."

But Shikama just shook her head again. [\_Your sister was not like that. I spent some time in her body, if you don't remember. In the end, she died for someone other than herself. I am only glad she didn't take me with her.\_]

"What are you trying to say?" Shinoa asked bitterly, gritting her teeth.

[\_I'm saying that this might be your last time to turn back,\_] Shikama said abruptly, and at last she turned to face Shinoa fully. [\_If things continue this way, you will no longer be the girl you were when we contracted. The carefully drawn lines we have played around ourselves will deteriorate. I am offering you a chance to avoid that.\_]

The demon held out the glass orb between them. Inside, the black and white were swirling perpetually about each other, eternally balanced. But only for now.

[\_This is your soul,\_] Shikama explained. [\_If you so wish it, I could enter it completely and take over your body. You would lose your humanity, but you would need have to feel the pain of losing someone again. You would never have to fear watching Yuu die.\_]

Shinoa peered into the glass orb that encapsulated her essence, and thought that it was actually ridiculously small, just the right size to fit into Shikama's palm. Could something so insubstantial really protect everything she cared about? Would she have the strength to never lose someone again? Maybe Shikama was right. She couldn't lose something she didn't have.

As the demon waited, Shinoa closed her eyes for a long moment, but

when she opened them she was smiling wanly.

"I'm sorry, Shi-chan," she said. "But I can't accept your offer. I can't leave any of them behind. I can't leave Yuu behind."

Shikama's eyes bored into her. [\_This is only for your own benefit, Shinoa. I remember the pain you felt when you lost your sister. It was deep enough that I was nearly able to consume you from the inside. Are you prepared to risk feeling that again?\_]

Shinoa's smile deepened, and this time she was the one turning away from the demon, pacing languidly towards the horizon. "I don't know. Probably not. But at the same timeâ€¦I feel like I need to watch out for him. I haven't changed, Shi-chan. I still believe it's best just to watch out for myself. But he's special. I feel like I need to stay by his side, for just a little longer."

Shikama sighed and hid the orb away in her body. [\_Very well. I hope you don't come to regret your decision.\_]

"You'll follow me regardless, won't you?" Shinoa pointed out.

[\_Yes. I am not your usual demon, after all,\_] Shikama murmured, before burning out into ashes. The horizon began to recede.

[\_I'm only worried because humans have a bad habit of dying.\_]

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm sure she'll wake up soon, Yuu. Shinoa's a strong girl."<p>

"She overexerted herself enough to take down a progenitor in one hit, Yoichi. I don't know if she's going to be okayâ€¦"

"She was able to do that \_because\_ she's strong. Have more faith in her."

Shinoa let her head fall limply to the side. She was in the meeting room again, the one with the glass wall, laid out over a large table in the center of the room. It was less than comfortable, and the hard surface of the table dug into her tired muscles, but at least that meant she was alive.

"I hope so." Yuu was sitting on the floor beside Yoichi, facing away from Shinoa and towards the glass wall. He was wringing his hands. "I don't want to lose her. I don't want to lose anyone."

"Yuu," Shinoa croaked, her throat dry and raw, voice just barely slipping through.

The swordsman whirled around and saw her, and then he was scrambling to his feet and running over to the table, abandoning his sword on the floor in his haste.

"Shinoa," he breathed, stopping in front of the table. "Are you okay?"

The sergeant put an arm over her eyes, letting out a pent up breath. "Do I look okay?"

Yuu sighed in relief at the sarcastic response. "I guess you're fine, then."

"I-I'll go tell the others you're awake," Yoichi volunteered, before scurrying out of the room.

Once he left Shinoa tried to sit up on the table, but hot lights exploded behind her eyes and she fell to her back again, groaning in discomfort.

"Shinoa!" Yuu murmured, reaching out and putting a hand on the girl's wrist, feeling for her pulse. It was skyrocketing.

For some reason Shinoa found herself grasping at the boy's hand, lacing her fingers through his. She didn't know why she did it, but Yuu didn't object, and it gave her strength. His hands were warm, calloused.

Eventually the hot throbbing in her head receded somewhat, and she managed to sit up on her own power, rubbing gingerly at her temples afterwards.

"Are you hurt anywhere inside?" Yuu asked, holding her by the shoulders and casting his gaze around her entire body, like he could see internal bleeding that way. Shinoa rolled her eyes at the misguided attempt to care.

"I'm fine. None of my organs ruptured," she assured him, pushing his hands away gently. "My body just wasn't used to handling two pills at once."

"I can't believe you just charged in like that," he murmured, taking a step back. Shinoa hopped off the table and landed on her feet, wobbling slightly before regaining her balance. "I thought I was going to die for sure back there."

"Well, I wasn't about to let her kill my favorite private," Shinoa smiled, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. Her eyes felt dry and they burned when she blinked. Her entire body hurt, but she tried not to show it.

Yuu just smiled weakly back. "So I'm your favorite private now?"

"Sure you are. Feel honored," Shinoa replied airily, walking stiffly past Yuu and standing in front of the wall of glass. She looked down at the street below. "Where are the others?"

"In the other room, interrogating Chess," Yuu said, walking up behind her.

Shinoa blinked in surprise. "They managed to subdue her without killing her?"

"I wanted to just kill her outright, but Mika asked us to wait." Yuu pursed his lips. "He wants to ask her where they're keeping someone. I can't remember who it was."

So that was what this was all about. She had been right; Mika wanted



to discover Krul's location. She wasn't so sure what good that information would do. Even if they managed to extract it from Chess, she doubted they would be able to save Krul, wherever she was.

"We should go help them," she said, turning towards the door.

Yuu's hand stopped her, and she glowered up at him. "Rest first," he chided, steering her back to the wall of glass. "Mika said they have things under control. You're in no condition to fight, anyway."

So the boy had seen through her front. He knew just how weak she was at the moment. Perhaps she shouldn't be surprised; Yuu had nearly died from overdosing on pills before as well. "And you aren't?"

The boy smirked. "My job is to keep an eye on you."

That made Shinoa roll her eyes again. She was the one usually keeping an eye on Yuu, not the other way around. She sat down a few feet from the wall of glass, crossing her legs. Yuu joined her a few moments later, and together they watched the morning lights dance through the window.

"Was anyone else hurt in the fight?" Shinoa asked. Her voice came out more softly than she had intended, hushed, like she was afraid to ask.

"Mika took a lot of cuts fighting Chess," Yuu said. "But I let him feed from me, and most of his wounds have closed up. He'll be fine."

So they had managed not to lose anyone this time, either. First the Horseman and the convoy, now the two vampire nobles. Shinoa didn't know how long they could continue this before they weren't so lucky anymore. Eventually one of them was going to die. It was a question of when, not if.

Biting her lip, the sergeant closed her eyes and lowered her head. There she went again, thinking negative thoughts. It was in her nature, she knew; but wasn't that the simple reality?

She knew Yuu didn't think that way. Yuu had the courage to defy reality. He had the audacity to believe he could defeat chance, that he could beat probability. He could think that way because he was willing to give up his life for the people he loved.

Shinoa was not.

"Promise you won't do something reckless like that again," Yuu said, breaking into her thoughts.

Far ahead of them, the sun had broken through the heavy blanket of clouds above the shallow lake. Its light skipped across the water and poked at her eyes, and for a moment she thought she saw the black horizon of her dreams.

"You would have died if I didn't do something," Shinoa countered, looking down at her hands.

Yuu sidled a little closer to her, until their shoulders were brushing. "I know. I'm saying that's okay. I don't want you to get

hurt because of me. I don't want any of you guys to get hurt."

\_But what if I feel the same as you do?\_ Shinoa thought. It would have been an appropriate response, but the problem was that she didn't believe it. If anything, Yuu's words should make her happy. He was allowing her to lead the same selfish lifestyle she had always led. He was allowing her to protect only herself. She should have been satisfied with that. This way, she wouldn't have to change.

But inside, she only felt cold.

Why was that? It didn't make any sense. Logically, she knew that Shikama was right. They were all alone, in this cruel world of theres. They all died the same. In that way, no life was different from another. If she was going to save one person, it might as well be herself.

Her eyes were burning, prickling. Shinoa shut them and pressed the backs of her palms against the lids. She didn't know. She didn't want to think about it right now.

Thinking back, she remembered that fear that had consumed her, in the brief instant before she killed Horn. She could still feel it, the exhilarating rush, the mixture of fear and hatred and love, as she cleaved the vampire clean in half.

She remembered that, and held fast to it. It was the only concrete thing she had to go on right now.

She was so tired.

Yuu blinked when something small and soft landed against his shoulder, and when he looked to the side Shinoa was leaning heavily against him, eyes closed as she propped her head against the boy's chest.

"Shinoa?" he breathed, feeling his heart jump.

"Shut up," she muttered, turning to bury her nose in Yuu's shirt. "I've earned this much. Indulge me."

With that said, she grabbed Yuu's hand and placed it on her head, before promptly falling asleep against him.

Yuu stared at the mystery of a girl for a long moment, then sighed and obliged her, stroking her hair in smooth, gentle movements. Shinoa purred as the sensation sent tingles down her spine, and she pressed even closer to him, allowing herself to indulge in the security of the moment, the joy in knowing she had save this boy, that for a time, his life had been hers.

It awoke a strange sensation within her, one she hadn't felt in years, not since she had had the luxury of spending time with her sister. It was the feeling of putting her safety in someone else's hands. She knew she shouldn't be allowing this. But the loving, reverent scratch of Yuu's fingers as they ran through her hair, the warmth of his body, and the steady rise and fall of his breathingâ€¦

It reminded her of a better time.

"Do you promise to be more careful?" Yuu whispered to her, his breath tickling her ear.

Shinoa just breathed slowly against him, feeling her muscles relax, pretending that she hadn't heard the boy's question.

\* \* \*

><p>Krul was jolted awake when the door opened once again.<p>

This time it was one of the guards, bringing in her scheduled allowance of blood. He came in wheeling that huge cart of blood, but she knew she was only going to get one of the dozens of packs laid out on the cart. It was a torturous sight on its own.

The guard opened a little hatch in the glass wall and tossed a pack of blood in. Krul dragged herself to her feet and walked over to it, bending down and picking it up in her hand.

When she looked up, she sensed an opportunity.

The guard had left the cart unattended to adjust something about the light, which they had thankfully dimmed a little during the past few hours. His back was to the wall of glass, and he couldn't see Krul from his position.

There were dozens of empty blood packs already scattered around her cell. Another one would be easily disguised among them.

Moving quickly, she reached through the glass hatch and grabbed two more packs, tossing them into a pile of empty ones nearby.

A moment later the guard finished and returned to the cart. He gave Krul a mean look before disappearing into the hall.

She waited until his footsteps were no longer audible before running back to the pile of trash, digging through it until she found the filled packs disguised underneath.

This was it. This was the beginning of a new hope. A path out of this accursed cell, and a new life beyond the reach of Lest Karr. Hastily, she screwed the cap off the first pack.

Tilting her head back, she began to drink.

\* \* \*

><p>AN

This was supposed to go up tomorrow but I was done so hey why not.

Yuunoa moments are scattered kind of sparsely so far, and I can only promise that they will increase in density, probably started at around chapter 10 (I think?) and I mean they're gonna increase a LOT. Just not yet.

Tell me what you guys think about this chapter! Reviewer responses below.

Thanks for reading!

~Banshee

\* \* \*

><p>Reviewer Responses<p>

Justinsj5: I know, me too. But patience is a virtue.

Classifiedanime: I actually haven't read semper memento yet, but I'm familiar with the title. I found out that story got discontinued so now I'm kind of reluctant to start reading it, haha.

Blankprofe: Leave me alone omg

End  
file.